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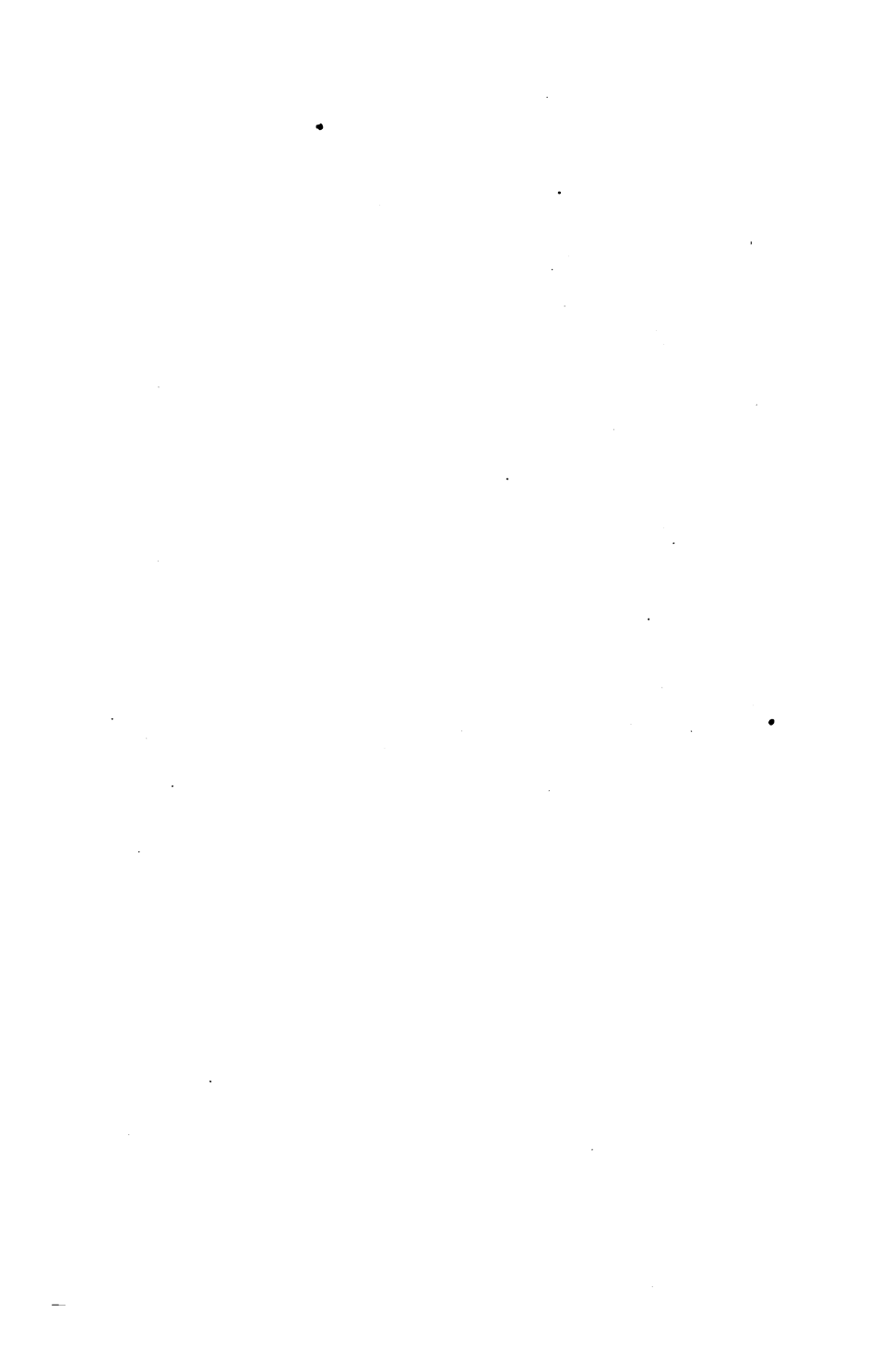
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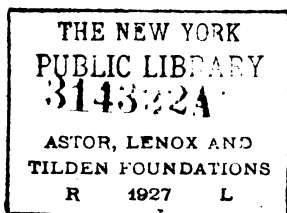
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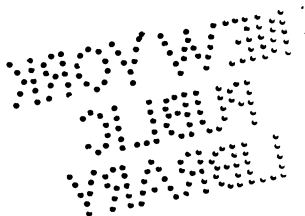


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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. ONE WAY OF LOVE	1
II. LALLY	8
III. A WEDDING	19
IV. BOB TAKES HIS ANSWER	27
V. AN ACCIDENT	34
VI. THE GYPSY BLOOD	44
VII. BOB'S FATHER	53
VIII. AT THE RECTORY	59
IX. A WET WEEK	65
X. EXIT CLAUDE	73
XI. PROMOTION FOR MARY	84
XII. BOB IS CONVALESCENT	94
XIII. NEVER—FOREVER	100
XIV. AT ASHFIELDS	109
XV. THE COURSE OF TRUE-LOVE	119
XVI. "ALL ABOUT A RIDICULOUS DOG'S COLLAR"	129
XVII. TIMOTHY	137
XVIII. OLIVIA COMES TO STAY	144
XIX. DEAR MRS. BARKAWAY	149
XX. MARY IS DIPLOMATIC	158
XXI. "FORGIVE US OUR VIRTUES—FORGIVE US"	164
XXII. BOB SEEKS HIS FORTUNE	176
XXIII. "LET CECIL DO HIS WORST!"	184
XXIV. "SAY ONLY GOOD-BYE"	191
XXV. "FOR BABY'S SAKE!"	203
XXVI. DE MORTUIS NIL NISI BONUM	214
XXVII. GOOD-BYE!	220
XXVIII. BOB'S LUCK TURNS AT LAST	230
XXIX. CONCLUSION	237



IN SUMMER SHADE

CHAPTER I

ONE WAY OF LOVE

WITH some branches of pink may in her arms, Mary Burne came down the tree-shadowed road leading from Gaythorpe Village to Gaythorpe Hall. Leaning against the stile she would have to climb to make the short cut through the park appeared the figure of a man. The dusk of a spring day, which had been cold and gray and sullen, was coming on, and the light beneath the big chestnuts was uncertain; but in spite of its back being turned to her, Mary knew the figure at a glance, and for a moment hesitated and seemed to think of flight. Then the white bull-terrier sitting patiently on its haunches by the man's side thumped its long tail with a kind of lazy joyfulness upon the ground, and emitted from its big throat a short deep bark of welcome, whereupon the bull-terrier's master turned quickly and stood up.

He was a young man of medium height, but so broadly and strongly built as to appear shorter than he was, with large limbs and hands and feet, and a face not too well featured, and of a very dark and weather-beaten complexion. He lifted the cap which he wore pulled down very much over his eyes, and looked at Mary with an expression of keen anxiety and painful entreaty upon his by no means handsome face.

He came forward and grasped her hand in silence, holding it an unwilling prisoner in his for a full minute before he spoke, gazing at the girl with a humble supplication, eloquent enough, in his eyes the while.

"Where have you been? What have you been doing with yourself?" he said, at length, his naturally slow voice thick and husky. "It's an age since I saw you last."

Mary laughed a little. It was evident that she herself was not quite free from embarrassment.

"It is—let me see—one, two, three days—yes, three days since you spent the whole afternoon and evening in my charming society," she said. "How long is an age? What have I done with myself? Do you forget that to-morrow is little Lal's wedding-day? If there were a dozen Mary Burnes instead of only one, there would still be more to think of and to do than the whole energetic twelve of them could accomplish."

He met her smiling eyes with that humbly beseeching gaze of his which made her so uncomfortable, but said nothing.

She pointed to the branch of budding may in her arms, and hurried on with an evident desire to be at her ease:

"This, you see, is for the table to-morrow. You remember how fond poor Lally is of pink—and we with nothing but yellow and white in all the garden! I all at once remembered Mrs. Le Grice's may-tree, and I am just rushing, *rushing* home with the spoils. What have I done with myself indeed!"

"For one thing you have kept out of my way, haven't you?" he asked, not angrily at all—quite humbly, with bent head.

Mary looked away from him over the flat and cheerless landscape. Although it was late spring, the atmosphere had a wintry freshness; the sun was sinking, a ball of dull red, not lifting the sombre gray of the sky; the prospect of a fine day for to-morrow's wedding was small. The girl sighed as her eyes sought the horizon. She had a great desire to escape from what she knew was before her, and there was no escape.

"Mary, why should you keep out of my way?"

"You gave me a week to consider," she said, slowly, under her breath.

"You took a week," he corrected. "Mary, don't make me—I can't wait the week."

He lifted his head and pushed his cap backward, thereby improving the aspect of his face, for his brow, if low, was broad, and the brown hair which unduly encroached upon it was soft and very curly; the eyes, alight with imploring eagerness, although deep set, were wide apart, blue in color, and honest looking.

"Look here!" he said, desperately, "what difference 'll four days make, Mary? I sha'n't alter. Nothing 'll alter for you. You only know now what you've known all along. 'Tisn't a new thing. You can't remember when I wasn't in love with you. Now I'm worse—I'm— Mary, tell me if you love me!"

She moved her eyes, shifting them uneasily over the melancholy evening landscape. Her fingers played with the pink may-buds.

"It isn't only—that," she murmured, uneasily.

"Only what, dear?"

"Only a question of—love."

"Oh, Mary! Of what then?"

"Of you; of what you would be to me. Of me; of what I should be to you."

"I should be—what you wish," he said, his voice dropping to a husky whisper of tenderness.

"Yes—and I—what should I be? How do I know—how do I know!"

"You would be yourself! If you loved me, I would not care what you were. No—and I won't lie to you—if you don't love me, if you hate me, it's all the same. I can't help it. I love you so. It's got such a hold of me it would make no difference if you hate me. Yet love me—love me, Mary!"

He was not eloquent; he strove visibly and with poor success to give expression to the love that was in him, yet was he terribly in earnest. The blue eyes, set deep in his broad dark face, seemed to dart fire into the long dark ones which Mary Burne, momentarily turning upon him, turned hastily away again; his frame trembled, his voice came huskily. He was as little as possible romantic in appearance; there was nothing in his outer man to compel love or admiration; his manner was awkward, even to loutishness; but his earnestness, the signs of an emotion he could not repress, and did not know how adequately to express, would have moved most women.

Yet Mary Burne just then was not sensible of being moved by aught stronger than the desire to run away. For one thing, she had known it all before, and heard most of it not once, but many times. At twenty, five years is an age to look back upon: it seemed to Mary that for all her life Bob Burton had been waylaying her steps, and telling her, not always in words, perhaps, but quite intelligibly, that he loved her. She had not particularly objected. Many a dull and otherwise uneventful day had passed the quicker for the circumstance. It was the fact that now at last, in one way or another, an end must come which embarrassed her.

At fifteen the knowledge that the strong, sturdy, but by no means polished and interesting youth, five years her senior, was her slave—actually hers to command, to play with, to punish, to reward—had filled her with joy and pride. Secretly, in those early days, she had

loved him with the shy and innocent devotion of her years. Time going on brought to her other lovers, developed her beauty, endowed her with a juster appreciation of herself and her attractions, of Bob—poor Bob!—and his. Miss Burne, truth to say, was an attractive young woman, and never wanted an admirer—contrived to have generally more than fairly fell to her share, in fact. And these had come and gone—come and gone—but Bob had always remained. There had never been any heart-burnings, any doubts or fears about Bob; and his perfect fidelity had become a little uninteresting.

Yet the indifference with which Mary Burne regarded that constant affection had been a fluctuating quantity. For in many a dark hour when her pride or her confidence had been wounded, when little difficulties had beset her, or friends had failed and admirers fallen away, the remembrance of that constant possession of her own—poor Bob, whom nothing sickened or wearied or turned away—lay warm at Mary's heart. There had been periods of depression in those long years when she had been comforted to think that Bob Burton was near; but the moments when she wished him nearer were very rare indeed.

The necessity, all at once put upon her, to take him altogether, or leave him altogether, was both bewildering and painful. She was only sure of herself that she was willing to do neither.

"If I say anything now, I must say no," she said, presently. "You had better not force me to answer now, Bob."

"And if I wait?"

"I don't know," she said, and hung her head for a minute in, to him, torturing irresolution.

"Bob, isn't it madness?" she burst out, presently, looking up at him. "If you had me—supposing I say yes—what would you do with me? What should I be? An addition to your troubles—nothing else. You have no money, have you? and not much of a prospect—poor Bob!—and I—I haven't a penny. As it is, you drag along, but with me you couldn't drag any further—I should be such a heavy burden, and we should starve together. I don't wish to starve—even with you, Bob. It is madness. Give it up."

"Give you up, you mean?"

"Let us go on as we are. It has been very pleasant, Bob. Change is a nuisance, don't you think? Go on as we are, Bob."

"I won't," Bob said, with sudden sullen passion. "I have borne as much as I can bear. Somehow or other I will know."

There was sufficient light left in the sodden gray sky to show her

that his face had grown pale. He let his hands fall heavily upon her shoulders, and drew her with a passionate movement close to him.

"Tell me the worst, Mary," he said, roughly. "It's going to be bad, I know. Get it over quickly. Tell me the worst."

But at that supreme moment Mary lifted her face, with a light of relief upon it, and listened.

"Hark!" she said, with joyfullest intonation. "There are wheels. I will see you in a day or so—I will indeed, Bob. Look, there is some one coming! Let me go."

But when he felt her slipping from him, being wrought by despair to a pitch of daring which had hitherto only seemed possible to him in his dreams, he drew her closer within his arms, kissed her passionately upon her face, and pressed her madly, pink may and all, to his heart.

And if the thorns beneath the sweet flowers pierced his breast, those were not the only wounds by many and many Robert Burton was destined to receive at the hands of Mary Burne.

She frowned upon him with a flushed face, and tore herself out of his arms, gave a hurried, apprehensive glance in the direction of the approaching carriage, and in another instant had climbed the stile, and was running across the park to the Hall, which was her home.

Burton did not turn to watch her; he stood as she had left him, with hanging head, breathing heavily, and trembling in every limb, conscious only of the strength of the feeling which possessed him. The wheels Mary had heard sounded nearer, but it was not until they stopped at his side that he lifted his head.

A powerful-looking black horse was sharply pulled up, a groom in a conspicuous livery sprang to its tossing head, and the man holding the reins called familiarly to Burton from the tall dog-cart in which he sat—a man of fair complexion, big and bloated, who lolled forward in his seat as if the effort of sitting upright were too much for him.

"Ah, old man! Old Bob! Going to sleep in the road?" he asked. Then pointed with his whip to the figure running across the park. "One of the Burne girls," he said. "Which?"

Burton did not answer, and the other man lifted himself a little, and peered more intently through the gathering gloom.

"Our Mary, I see," he said, and continued to watch the figure while it remained in view. Then he laughed, and looked down upon Burton standing by the tall wheels of the smart dog-cart. "Running away from you or from me, Bob?" he asked.

Bob scowled beneath the cap he had drawn over his eyes.

"Miss Burne is hurrying home, I suppose—I don't know," he said, sullenly. It was anguish to him to hear Mary's name on any man's lip; but it was an anguish to which a large experience had compelled him to grow painfully accustomed.

"Oh! well, get up, and come along home with me. There's nothing on to-night, and I want rousing up. Jump in."

"No."

"Why not? Getting yourself in trim for to-morrow's wedding?"

"The wedding's nothing to me. I'm not going to the wedding."

"How's that?"

"For one thing, I suppose, because I'm not asked. Don't suppose I should go if I was."

He had turned a side face to the view of his companion, and was proceeding to kick up a stone from the road with the toe and heel of his boot.

"Isn't that rather rummy treatment, Bob? Thought you were always to be found hanging about there?"

"I go there sometimes," Bob admitted, in his heavy, reluctant way. "I don't know that I'm ever *asked* to go, for that matter."

The man in the dog-cart laughed. "Invitations among friends are all tommy-rot," he said. "Weddings aren't much in my line—had too much of 'em personally to last me my lifetime—but I mean to wish little Lal good-luck to-morrow. You come along with me, Bob, and back me up."

But Bob declined, and changed the subject.

"You've got a new horse, Spilling?" he said.

"Got him yesterday. What do you think of him? Wants drivin', I can tell you. My arm's pretty well out of the socket."

"He seems a restless beggar," Burton said, and stepped back into the road the more critically to consider the valuable horse-flesh before him. The groom was clinging with both hands to the foam-flecked tossing head. "You're bound to break your neck some day with the horses you ride and drive, Spilling. You may as well do it with one as another, I suppose."

"And at one time as another," Spilling responded, with his thick laugh, and nodded his head in farewell, called to his groom, and with a plunge and a dash was off.

Burton looked after him as the smart-looking vehicle receded.

"Only about half drunk to-night, poor beggar!" he said. "I wonder what freak's taken him to go to the Hall to-morrow. The chances are, when the time comes, he'll have forgotten all about it."

The groom, in his terra-cotta livery, having sprung to his master's side, was heard, as he sat with crossed arms looking fixedly at the laid-back ears of the black horse, to be chuckling with laughter. Mr. Spilling had a very easy manner with his inferiors and dependants. In fact, no occasion could ever arise which would find that gentleman ceremonious or dignified.

"Why the old Harry are you chortling there, you fool?" he demanded, not at all impatiently, of the man at his side, digging him familiarly in the ribs with his elbow the while.

"Pity we 'adn't 'ave knowed," the man, still enjoying his private joke, replied. "We'd 'ave come t'other way round, sir, if we'd 'ave knowed."

"Knowed what, you thundering ass?"

"Knowed we should 'ave stopped the courtin'. When we come round the bend, sir, Mr. Burton, lor, he were a kissin' his young woman. My word, he were a carryin' on! She were over the stile before you could call 'crikey,' but not afore I'd see'd her, though. She weren't quick enough for that, Miss Burne were not."

"The more of a sheep's-head you," his master assured him. Then after a moment's reflection, and with the sudden bluster to which Charles the groom was quite accustomed, and by which he was not at all alarmed, "What the devil business was it of yours?" he burst out. "The next time you see what you aren't meant to see—dash you!—shut your eyes, and—dash you!—hold your tongue!"

CHAPTER II

LALLY

MARY BURNE, having crossed the park and that part of the garden divided from the park by an iron railing, gained the Hall. She stood a while upon the stone steps which led to the built-out porch, and looked back across the moss-grown gravel sweep, the lawn on which the sundial stood with grass growing half-way up its pedestal, the park where the trees—grand oaks and elms and ashes—grew each year less and less, felled ruthlessly for the sake of the few guineas they put in their owner's pockets. An indescribable air of neglect and poverty was upon the whole scene. The railings were rusty and in many places broken down, the gate which divided the long straight drive past the lodge from the circular drive before the house had fallen off the hinges, and was bound in a careless and inefficient manner to the post from which it still fell away. A swing hanging from a broken limb of the ash which shaded the gate enhanced the melancholy of the scene, the dangling rope and dirty cushion depending from the twisted, broken branch upon which all the fresh young foliage had withered. A big doll in a very dragged under-garment, and minus hair and eyes, flung from an upper window, had caught in a laurel-bush growing on one side of the porch, and with extended arms and legs pointing in all directions seemed to claim attention to the distressful condition of its surroundings.

The Hall itself was a long unpretentious-looking building of red brick. There was a plenteous growth of untrimmed ivy, clematis, and rose about its walls; all its windows were curtainless. It was a house which easily would have taken upon itself a cheerful and home-like air, but which, under present circumstances, and especially in that chill, damp atmosphere and gloomy light, had a very comfortless and disheartening aspect.

The eldest daughter of the house looked out over the dreary prospect. Her eyes were good, and she could distinguish the broad figure of the young man to whom she had been talking, and she recognized also the form of Mr. Spilling seated in the dog-cart by his side.

"Thank goodness, I missed him!" she said aloud, with her eyes

on the latter gentleman. Her bosom was heaving, and she was panting still from her run; she paused a minute still to recover her breath. "However Bob dared!" she said to herself. "However he dared!" Then she laughed a little, in spite of the fact that she was by no means pleased, shrugged her shoulders, and, turning quickly, flung open the big hall door and entered.

She looked around the wide stone hall. "Here, somebody come and take this may," she called, but no one responding, she threw the branches out of her arms and ran up-stairs to the room which she shared with Lavarina, the second daughter—that Miss Burne whose nuptials were to be celebrated on the morrow. Upon the threshold she paused and peered into the room—a room whose carpet was in holes, whose draperies were scant and faded, whose paper and paint were blistered and defaced with time and ill-usage. The furniture, however, in this, and in all the rooms of Gaythorpe Hall, had been costly, and was of the heavy inartistic fashion of forty years ago. At the end of the bedroom, which was long, low-ceilinged, narrow, a big rosewood wardrobe with a panel of looking-glass was placed, and before this just now a charming figure was standing—the figure of a girl of eighteen years, whose small, slight form was clothed in a long-trained garment of white satin, upon whose waving, carelessly tossed-up gold locks white flowers were placed.

"Is it finished, Lal? How does it do?" the elder sister asked, with breathless interest. She came across the shadowed room and contemplated the wedding gown by the aid of two candles placed on chairs on either side of the wardrobe.

The eyes of the little bride were devouring her own reflection in the glass. She twisted her graceful form now this way, now that, to inspect herself in every position, lifting her arms, craning her pretty throat.

"Oh, Mamie, is that you at last?" she said. "I *have* been wanting you so! Mamie, *what* do you think of this wreath from my shoulder? Myrtle and orange-blossom, do you see? Sweetly pretty in itself, but doesn't it, just a little, hide my figure? You like it? Now, are you sure—quite sure? Oh, Mamie, it isn't anything to laugh at! You shouldn't laugh at me! Of course I want to look my best on my wedding day."

"And so you will," Mary said, with enthusiasm. "I'd no idea you'd got it in you to look half so well."

The face of the younger girl brightened with satisfaction. "I've never had a chance like other girls of my age before," she said, lift-

ing her fair head with its chaplet of flowers. "You'll see how it will be now. No—you won't, though—Cecil has a horror of smart things and a fad that women should be dressed only in blacks and grays. I expect he'll want to put me into a coarse serge with a crucifix, and will insist on my binding up my head like a corpse. He'll be disappointed, then; I sha'n't do it."

Mary laughed. "Oh yes, you will," she said. "Or, if he should prefer it, you'll stick your head into the fire, Lally. Why, in a month's time you won't have a will of your own, or an idea that isn't his. I know all about you—both."

"A nice lookout for me, then," Lally said, still admiring herself in the glass, "but a change, certainly; for I assure you I don't think as Cecil does now, and I wish for—oh, a lot of things!"

She began with a little sudden impatience and irritation to pull off her wedding dress, but stopped in the midst of the proceeding to throw into her sister's lap a small jeweller's case she picked up from the toilet table.

"Look there!" she said, beginning to struggle again with the hooks of her dress; "just see what his wedding present to me is. He asks me to wear it to-morrow—(oh, dear! I told her to make it tight in the waist and it *is* tight!)—but I'll see him in Jericho first."

"Is it the Victoria cross copied in gold? What is it, dear?" Mary asked, lifting the contents of the jeweller's box to the light. "It is very pretty."

"I don't know what it is!" Lally declared, in disdain. "He told me, but I forget. It's the temperance badge—or the badge of going without food on a Friday, or the badge of some ridiculous thing or another. He's got them hanging all over him. Haven't you noticed them, Mary?"

Mary hadn't seen them, she declared, laughing.

"Ah, well! you're not so desperately interested. I have. It's no laughing matter, Mary. They each mean some pleasant thing he has to renounce, or some disagreeable thing he has to do. I wonder how you'd like it if you were in my place!"

"It's a shame to laugh," Mary said. "If he were a humbug one couldn't stand it, but you've got to respect sincerity, Lal, wherever you find it. My dear, when I see you again you'll be hung with orders of different Christian societies like a savage with beads."

"Oh, it's all very well," Lal said; "you haven't got to go through with it, and I have."

She wrinkled her brow and pouted a little, but she did not look at all unhappy. She had divested herself of her frock, and she stood beside it, in her scant short petticoat, as it lay upon the bed and smoothed out its tiny folds and patted its wreath of cheap artificial flowers with a loving and reverent hand. The satin was thin and poor looking; it had been fashioned to the pretty form it was intended to adorn by the hand of a village dress-maker. It was such a garment as could have aroused awe and admiration in the simplest, least sophisticated breast alone, but to the inexperienced eyes of Lally Burne it was a marvel of richness and a triumph of skill.

"I suppose, when once I'm married to Cecil, his people will have to invite me over to Bygrave Court, however much it goes against them. I shall wear this dress," said Lally, with an air of saying, "I think that will take the wind out of their sails, eh, Mary?"

Mary had turned her eyes from the ambitious raiment to the girl with her bare white arms and neck, with her flushed face, and her curling hair—a far more satisfactory sight to contemplate.

"Lally, what is that at your throat?" she demanded, suddenly.

Lally put up her hand a little guiltily. The string of pearls had been hidden by the lace of her dress, and she had forgotten it.

"It came this afternoon. It is a present," she explained.

Mary got up and went closer to the girl.

"It is a diamond clasp, and—I expect those pearls are good," she said, slowly. "Does that necklace come from Cecil's people, Lally?"

Lally hung her head a little. "Who do you think brought it for me this afternoon, Mamie?" she asked, with a suspicion of sheepishness in the averted face, a little apprehension in the tone of the voice. "He always said he would give me a handsome wedding present, you know—and it is handsome. Mother says it must have cost hundreds of pounds! Herbert Spilling brought it for me, Mary."

Mary stared for a moment at her sister, and a flush came into her cheek.

"Herbert Spilling!" she said. "Lally, you must be a fool! You and I have had enough of Herbert Spilling to last us for our lives, I should think." With no gentle touch she pulled the ornament from the girl's throat, hastily rolled it in her pocket-handkerchief, and thrust it into her pocket. "Wear your husband's symbols and badges," she said; "we'll send his pearls and diamonds back to Mr. Spilling, Lal."

The younger girl stood, shamed and crestfallen, with her head bowed over her wedding dress, but she made no resistance.

"I thought you'd be angry," she said, "but he brought it, and I didn't know what to do. And mamma has asked him to come to-morrow, Mary."

"How thoughtless, how ignorant, how disgusting of mamma!" Mary said, with eyes suddenly ablaze; "you'd have thought even she would have known better than that."

"Mamma never had any sense of decency, you know," Lally said, with calm conviction. "I did tell her I knew you would not like it, but she said, you always made such a ridiculous fuss about the man; she said we couldn't take his presents and not ask him to the house. And there's something in that—I don't see how we could, you know."

"We could fling his presents in his face, I suppose," Mary said, fiercely. Then with quick compunction, "I'm sure I don't know what he's ever done that we should treat him in that fashion, though. Oh, dear—I wonder what's to be done with him to-morrow, Lal? He'll be very likely tipsy, and won't know what he's saying, and—How could mamma be so stupid—so stupid—so stupid!"

Lally raised a pair of startled eyes from her wedding dress. "Oh, Mary," she said, affrightedly, "tipsy! Oh, do something, Mary. Don't let him come. If he's there I daren't see him, Mary, I daren't. I won't be married. Oh, Mary—"

"I'll stop him—never fear," Mary said, reassuringly. "I'll get Bob to help me. It'll be all right—somehow, Lal."

Lally was at once pacified, and she turned her attention to another matter. Tearing herself from the festal raiment, she walked across the room and sat down in the arm-chair, looking very childish and innocent with her plump round cheeks, her soft small arms and shoulders, and her little ill-shod feet showing beneath her short petticoat.

"Mary, have you seen Bob to night?" she inquired.

"Seen him? Of course I've seen him. When—once escaped from the shelter of my own room—am I free from seeing Bob?"

"You can answer me or not, of course, as you like; but as I'm going to be married to-morrow, and going away—Mary, I think you might tell me. Are you going to marry Bob?"

"Marry him? No!" said Mary, promptly, and with much emphasis. "You have marrying on the brain, Lally. Marry Bob indeed!"

It was easy enough to make up her mind about Bob under the present circumstances and for the moment; the difficulty was to keep in that same mind for any length of time, and to find courage to acquaint Bob with her decision.

"You ought to do better than Bob Burton now, Mary," Lally said, lifting her head with a certain air of importance, which affected the other to mirth, and looking at her sister solemnly out of a pair of very pretty eyes, dark in color and long in shape, as were the eyes of all the Burne girls, but with an habitual expression of shyness and timidity in them, natural only to the eyes of Lally. "I think you ought to do better than Bob."

"I think so, too," Mary said, brusquely. "I should do badly indeed if I didn't do better than Bob."

"Cecil," went on Lally, blushing a little, for she did not often seriously quote her future husband—"Cecil says we ought not even to be on terms of intimacy with Bob Burton—"

("There speaks the apostle of the doctrine of universal brotherhood," said Mary, in parenthesis.)

"He says that if our parents had been like the fathers and mothers of other girls—"

("And the teachers of the beauty of reverence and filial obedience—")

"Well, Mary," with a little offence, "we know they aren't like other people's parents, don't we? There's no sense in being angry with Cecil about that. They're our own flesh and blood—but that's about all we can say for them. We should be in quite a different set, Cecil says."

"In his, for instance. What a privilege!"

"But when we got used to it we mightn't find it so bad, Mary."

"You'll be in it, at any rate, dear. There'll be one of us caught as a brand from the burning."

"I won't be in any set without you, Mary; and perhaps some one—like Cecil, only nicer—will fall in love with you, and—"

"And perhaps you'll leave off talking nonsense and will go to bed," Mary said.

As she left the room and ran down-stairs she laughed to think of Lally's simple plans for her advancement. "My dear future brother-in-law has been putting that idea into little Lally's empty head," she said to herself. But in this supposition she was wrong.

In marrying into the Burne family the Rev. Cecil Garnett knew that he was taking, from a wordly point of view, a disastrous step. Infatuated as he was with his pretty and childish bride, he was by no means in love with his bride's people. He had lost his heart, but he flattered himself that he still retained perfect command of

his reason, and he had decided to discourage as far as possible intercourse between his wife and her relatives.

At the Rectory, distant some half-mile from the Hall, the bridegroom-elect was seated at dinner with his elder brother (the future head of the House of Garnett), who had come to support him through the morrow's trying ordeal.

The Rector was a man of about thirty years, of average height, straight, well proportioned, well featured, but thin and spare to a degree almost painful to behold. His thick black hair was cut close to his head; his complexion was colorless, save for the dark-blue shade on cheek and lip and chin, showing where the ruthless razor mowed its daily crop; his eyes were of a steely blue and set deep in his head—together a man whom a tonsured head and a monastic garb would have become very well.

He was eating nothing himself, but was watching his brother do justice to the dinner which the kitchen-maid had saved from utter ruin at the expense of much trouble and temper, Claude Garnett having arrived several hours later than was expected. The Rector twisted his glass of water in slender white fingers, and looked across at his brother with a half-veiled expression of mingled admiration and deprecation.

"I'm really much obliged to you for coming, Claude," he was saying. "I'm glad, for the sake of my future wife as well as my own. It would have seemed like putting such a slight upon her if none of my family had shown up."

"My dear fellow, of course I came," the other said.

He was a handsomer man than his brother—taller, bigger, fairer; with that indefinable something in his appearance, manner, bearing we associate without sufficient reason, perhaps, with the well-born and highly cultured; with a suspicion of haughtiness in the carriage of his head, in the tone of his agreeable voice, in the glance of his eyes.

"Of course, when I knew that your mind was irrevocably made up—when I found that you were serious about the thing—I said at once that I would go; that I would do anything you wished," Claude said. He spoke with the air of anxious commiseration with which a man might assure another on his death-bed that his wishes would be sacred.

"It was very good of you. I am greatly obliged. I was serious from the very first," the Rev. Cecil said, hanging his head. "Of course I was serious."

And indeed he looked as if his views on most subjects were likely to be of a deadly seriousness.

"I am aware," he went on, presently, with an effort, "that the marriage I am making is, from a worldly point of view, disappointing. What my father and sisters wrote to me on the subject was true in a sense—quite true. It was not from contempt of their opinion or from any disrespect that I seemed to turn a deaf ear. I admitted their arguments—I did, Claude. But although I did this—and although I wrestled with myself till my bodily health suffered—my appetite failing, and sleep entirely forsaking my pillow—I could not conquer myself—I could not subdue the—the feeling I have for this girl. No! and I am grateful. The inclination was too strong, the cord which bound Lavarina to me appeared to be drawn closer and closer at the bare thought of severance. And at last I have seen that, putting her suffering on one side—which except in theory I could not do—and my own suffering, to destroy this—this affection, which has become miraculously a part of me, would be a crime against myself, against nature, against the God who made me—a crime little less than the crime of self-murder."

His voice, always deep and sonorous, had trembled with emotion, hardly restrained, through the delivery of that speech; towards the end it dropped to a solemn whisper. The thought crossed Claude that if his brother would read the prayers of the Church service with as much impressiveness instead of repeating them very much through his nose on one high not too agreeable note, they might be more effective. But he was shy of any display of feeling between his brother and himself—the Garnetts were not a demonstrative family—and he avoided the anxious eyes which he felt upon his face as he helped himself to another glass of the young Rector's inferior claret, and he did not outwardly respond to the appeal for sympathy which he was conscious had been made to him. He was aware, however, that the subject was one which, in that house on that night, could not be ignored or put into the background, and he presently conscientiously approached it again from another direction.

"I think you mentioned Miss Burne's name, Cecil? Lava—Lalla—"

"Lavarina. We call her familiarly Lal or Lally. Claude, you know it is said that her mother was a gypsy?" The Rector's pale cheeks flushed painfully as he asked the question, and even his high and narrow forehead became suffused. "I don't know if truly said," he went on. "It has not seemed possible to me to make in-

quiries under the circumstances, but I have, I confess, no reason to doubt the statement. I have thought that her second daughter may have been named after some friend of her youth. I do not know. I wish to hide nothing from you, Claude; you have come to stand frankly at my side, and I will be frank with you. The immediate surroundings of my wife that is to be—her parentage, associations, upbringing, the whole atmosphere, in fact, in which her short life has been passed—is unwholesome, undesirable to a degree. So much you will see for yourself, and I myself will conceal nothing from you. Yet I have made my choice deliberately and open-eyed. I—”

“My dear fellow, it is a matter which closely concerns you alone; why go through the unpleasantness of discussing it? If you can put up with the—drawbacks—if one must so consider them—which you mention, what possible affair is it of mine? You are eating positively nothing yourself!—not any more chicken for me, Cecil, thanks.”

Cecil got up, and himself removed his brother's plate, replaced the spring chicken with a gooseberry tart from the sideboard, put the sugar and cream within reach. Claude Garnett was the pride and admiration of his family; he was held in a little awe by them; besides, truth to tell, even in the Rector's preoccupied condition, he felt the pleasure and honor of entertaining his elder brother in his house; he was delighted to see him enjoying the simple fare; for himself he asked no better than to wait on him.

“I will not pretend to you, Claude, that I do not see the disadvantages of my—of Lally's position,” he said, going back to his chair and his subject. “Yet I think you will be agreeably surprised when you see her to-morrow to find how superior she herself is to her surroundings—how unsullied, how dainty, how much of a gentlewoman she is!”

“But, after all,” said Claude, with a laudable desire to be pleasant over the inevitable, “her father was a gentleman. There is good blood in her veins.”

The Rector did not appear to acquiesce with any enthusiasm. “That is so, in a sense, of course,” he admitted. “Orlando Burne is of good family. Yet, Claude, I doubt if a man with the instincts of a gentleman could have married as he has done. And in such companionship what native refinement he started with must have been roughly rubbed off.”

“She is then a terrible specimen—Mrs. Burne?” Claude asked;

he dropped his voice, lifted his eyebrows, and looked with evident alarm at his brother.

Cecil did not answer, but his lips drew themselves together in a straight line, and he contemplated the table-cloth in his immediate neighborhood with gloom for a minute; then, with a suddenly lightened face, he looked up at his brother.

"I can promise you that your sister-in-law will never recall her, Claude," he said. "In not one single particular is my Lavarina her mother's child."

"And your sisters-in-law, Cecil? Are the rest of the girls—there are six of them altogether, didn't you say?—equally satisfactory?"

The thin lips tightened themselves into line again. "I shall remove my wife, as far as possible, from *all* home influences," the Rector said, and closed his mouth tightly on his resolution.

"But as the Burnes are your parishioners as well as your connections by marriage, and as you are stationed for life at the distance of half a mile from their door, won't that be a little difficult?" Claude said. He asked the question with polite indifference, slightly lifting his eyebrows, which nature had sufficiently arched, as he gazed upon the gooseberry tart. He was a man who was never disagreeable, even to the members of his own family, if he could avoid it. It was his unvarying politeness and air of gentle indifference which made him so inaccessible, placing him on a pinnacle removed from the other members of his family, who did not scruple to be "nasty" to each other in a well-bred permissible way upon occasion. In his heart, at the present moment, he was saying to himself what an ass his brother was, and that he had better have cut his throat than dishonored himself and the family name by the marriage he was making.

"I do not anticipate any difficulty," the Rector replied; "Lavarina, although of such a noble and upright spirit, is tractable as a child. It is, indeed, what constitutes her chiefest charm—her unswerving integrity of character and her—yes, the phrase will answer—her sweet reasonableness. My influence over her, you will understand, is great; it will naturally become greater. And I depend much upon her own pure instincts. I feel that even now she finds—poor child!—enforced companionship with coarser minds a pain and a difficulty. Being of a disposition so perfectly sweet, she of course conceals this feeling, and she naturally has an affection for her parents and sisters—in the case of the eldest girl an extreme affection."

"And is she—the eldest girl—will she have to be kept at a distance, too?"

"Mary is a clever girl, and said to be attractive; but she is clever in an unpleasant fashion, and she is attractive, I regret to say, to an undesirable class. She is handsome, undeniably so, after her mother's style of beauty, and big and bold and high-spirited; the kind of person who will not suffer herself to be overlooked; who is not happy unless she is the observed of all observers; who is assertive, even aggressive, in conversation; who is, compared with her younger sister, Claude, as the flaunting poppy, waving in the sunshine, to the fragrant violet shrinking in the shade—"

And so on.

"Poor old Cecil!" Claude said to himself as he betook him to bed in the strange bareness of the Rectory guest-room. "What a crew he has shipped for the long voyage. Poor old man! He was always a prig, and he was never overdone with brains, but one might have thought his self-conceit and common consideration for the feelings of other people would have kept him out of such a hole as this. I wonder what sort of a vulgar little schemer his Lavarina—what a name!—is. To-morrow I shall see."

CHAPTER III

A WEDDING

THE wedding did not take place until two o'clock on the following day. Claude Garnett declined his brother's somewhat timid suggestion that he should, during the morning, go up to the Hall and make the acquaintance of his future connections. He spent a morning, to which he afterwards looked back as being the longest of his life, in listening to repetitions of the over-night confidences, in hearkening to plans, to hopes, to regrets, to excuses, to apologies. In the light of the dull, chilly day, in presence of Claude's polite but unencouraging attitude, in contemplation of that air of natural distinction and unconscious superiority which was habitual with the future owner of Bygrave Court and its 5000 impoverished acres, the hazardous nature of the step he was taking was somewhat more evident to the bridegroom than in the excitement of seeing his claret and chicken so graciously appreciated overnight.

"If you don't have a sip of something to keep your courage up, you'll be fainting at the altar rails," Claude, who was really distressed at the Rector's nervous condition, said to him more than once during the morning.

But one of those little ornaments which the irreverent Lally declared to be dangling all over her lover's person was in token of a vow that no drop of the insidious alcohol should pass its wearer's lips; and the reverend gentleman had apparently devoted himself to partake of the sacrament of marriage fasting, and so had withstood the cry of his inner man for breakfast. So that Claude eyed with concealed misgiving the ghastly face which his brother took into church, and felt compelled to keep an anxious eye upon him through that lengthened period during which the bridegroom knelt in prayer, much whispered about and tittered at by the assembled rustic congregation.

The bride's party were long in coming. It seemed to Claude Garnett an age that he waited in silence by his brother's side, glancing from the rows of village faces, which interested him not at all, to the brasses and the mural tablets and the monuments of the

church. Several of these bore the name of Burne, and the inscriptions set forth the virtues and histories of many a man, woman, and maid of that now fallen race. The big painted window in the east end had been raised to the memory of a distinguished officer in the family—the uncle, Claude decided, of the degenerate Orlando—who had been killed at Balacava. The brass lectern bore an inscription on its base to the effect that it was presented to the church in memory of their dear mother, Lady Mary Burne, by her only son Orlando, and by Mary, her sorrowing only daughter. It was a mercy Lady Mary had not lived to see the muddle her only son Orlando had made of matters, Garnett said to himself by way of comment.

Then he changed his lounging attitude and concentrated his roving gaze; for there was a stir in the church, a hum of expectation, a craning of heads, and up the long red-carpeted aisle came Mrs. Burne. Claude knew her for the gypsy mother at a glance; he recognized the big frame, queenly and commanding once, but grown of unwieldy proportions, the masses of coarse black hair, too loosely coiled, the vulgar unsteady head, the roving glance, the gaudy dress, as belonging to the mental picture he had unconsciously painted of his unfortunate brother's mother-in-law.

At her side, dressed in white, there walked the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Claude contemplated this advancing figure in astonishment for a moment. Cecil had said that his Lavarina would surprise his brother by her grace and charm. Claude had made allowance for the enthusiasm of a lover; he certainly had not expected to see such a woman as this. Small wonder poor old Cecil had lost his head. At the smile of this daughter of the gods with her divine height, her skin so bright and warm, her eyes dark and soft as velvet, her masses of rich brown hair, it was conceivable that a man might even consent to hang himself up for life with such a mother-in-law.

Claude Garnett laid a finger on the bridegroom's arm as he stood with folded hands and downbent head before the altar.

"She is coming, Cecil," he said.

Then Cecil lifted his head and turned quickly, and the sudden light and flush the words had called there died off his thin face. Back he turned to the altar again.

"It is not she. It is only Mary, the eldest sister," he explained.

Miss Burne, having safely deposited her mother in one of the chancel seats, came on alone to her future brother-in-law. Claude,

through half-veiled eyes, and with that supercilious expression of which he was quite unconscious, but which many people resented as an offence, watched her approach. The dark, long-shaped eyes shot a side glance at him, and instantly a word or two his brother had said of the girl recurred to Claude's memory, "She is attractive to an undesirable class." Claude Garnett did not approve of women who shot side glances.

"Lally is all right and in good spirits," Mary Burne whispered to the bridegroom. "I am afraid she will be a little late—"

"She is twenty minutes late now," Cecil said, coldly. He pulled out his watch and pointed with a severe but trembling finger to the hands. "I am sure, however, that the fault is not Lally's."

"No. It is papa's. He had only just gone up to change when mamma and I came away. One of his patent shoes is lost. He says he can't possibly come without it."

It seemed to Claude that there was a gleam of malice in the soft dark eyes which dwelt for a moment on the bridegroom's solemn face before Mary left him for her mother's side. If so, she had been guilty of a gratuitous piece of mischief, for the Reverend Cecil's sufferings were evidently sufficient without that last straw of the missing patent shoe.

And almost immediately here were the sweet strains bursting forth of "The voice that breathed o'er Eden." Here, attended by her four younger sisters clad in pink and white, advancing over the crimson carpet, was the bride herself. No mistake this time; witness the veil, and the orange-blossom wreath, and the tiny satin train. She was leaning upon the arm of her father, a handsome fair man of a weak and amiable cast of countenance, and wearing a pair of brand-new patent shoes. Claude glanced at the lower extremities at once and in spite of himself.

And looking from the slight and childish figure of the kneeling bride to the radiant form of the bride's sister in the chancel seat, Claude Garnett marvelled greatly within his soul.

If a saving sense of humor had resided in the breasts of the Garnett brothers, the long agony of the collation which awaited them on their return from church might have been alleviated. As it was, the irregularities and shortcomings of which both were keenly conscious, and which by men more happily constituted might have been found amusing and even pleasant, filled them only with extreme alarm and discomfort. Except the pair of clergymen who had come

from a distance to perform the ceremony, no guests were present (by Cecil's express desire) at the informal feast, and a general chattering was substituted for the private conversation of a larger gathering, and the table was the scene of much family laughter and chaff and half-affected domestic squabbings.

The general company was informed of how long, by Mona's bee clock, which always kept good time—*always!* (except perhaps on that day when Tina took it into her bath with her, and of course no one could expect even bee clocks to stand that sort of treatment, could one?)—Lal had stood before her dressing-glass and would not be dragged away. Of how she had cried when her glove split across the back. Of how Mona, who had volunteered to sew it up, could not find a needle in all the house. Of how Lal had become cross, and had stamped her foot, and had said a wicked word.

A statement which the poor little bride, with a frightened look at her husband, with hot tears and a flaming face, had hurriedly contradicted. Wasn't Mona a wicked, wicked story-teller to make up such tales? Could not she, Lally, also tell tales of Mona? Did not Mary know that of all the family Lally was the one who never got in rages, who never, never, never said wicked words?

Whereupon Mary turns her attention from Tona, the smallest sister but one, who is pestering her with questions as to when the cake is to be cut up, and invites Lally to partake of lobster salad by way of changing the subject.

"Yes, but has Lally been asked by mamma?" Tona inquires, in her sweet drawl. All the Burnes have sweet and musical voices, all drawl a little in their speech. "Mamma said we were not to take lobster unless she *particularly* asked us. She said there was sure to be a run on the salad. Lally must wait until mamma asks."

Hereat mamma laughs and turns her foolish, good-natured face upon her youngest born, and shakes her head, and says Tona's tongue must be cut out. "Take charge of the salad, Mary, my dear, and don't forget a little of the coral with every helpin', child."

"After all, papa found his patent shoes," said Mary, in an undertone to the gentleman by whom she sat. "I saw the deadly anxiety in the glance you threw upon his feet as he entered. You expected to see him shuffling in in his carpet slippers, did you not?"

"His arrival in any costume would have been welcome," she was gravely assured. "If my brother had been kept in suspense much longer I shudder to think of the consequences."

"I did not think it possible for our Rector to look more dismal

than is habitual with him until I saw him on his marriage day," Mary said, with a laugh. "I don't know if my sister regards his gloom as exactly complimentary to herself."

"Brides are occupied fully with their own appearance on the great occasion, are they not?" he asked. "Let us hope Mrs. Cecil is under the impression that Cecil was as jubilant and triumphant as the event demands."

At which Mary shot at him one of those side glances he had decided that the "objectionable class" admired. "I understand your tone," she was saying to herself. "It would not be dignified on my part to notice the sneer. I will, perhaps, make it disagreeable for your high and mightiness later on."

"Another glass of champagne? Do, my dear fellow," Mr. Burne is heard urging at intervals—his only contribution to the conversation. "Mary, my dear, can't you persuade Mr. Garnett? Dear me, you're all wonderfully afraid of the champagne!"

They had every cause to be, as the gentlemen of the party early discovered. But Mrs. Burne and her younger daughters showed no fear; their eyes were very bright, their laughter grew louder, their chatter more incessant. The bridegroom touched his wife's arm as her glass was about to be filled, and she, with something of depression in her manner, refused the wine.

"Why, Lally! What are ye so timid about, child?" her mother asked, in her rallying way, and winked and nodded at her daughter by way of encouragement. "Come, Cecil, none of your nonsense so soon! Let her have one glass, poor little thing. She's got a journey before her, and wants somethin' sparklin' to keep her spirits up."

The Rector bestowed on her a glance of coldest disapproval. "My wife has given me her promise never again to touch alcohol in any form," he said.

Mrs. Burne shrugged her great shoulders, and turned to Claude.

"You aren't a teetotaler too?" she inquired. "That's right. It's more comfortable. Not that I hold with too much drink, of course. Not like a young man in the neighborhood, a friend of ours, that's always drunk."

"Mamma!" from Mary, frowning, and under her breath.

"Well, my dear? You know yourself, Mary, that Herbert Spilling, though he's a rich young fellow and drives splendid horses, and has his yacht and that, is never to say rightly sober. Even you know as much as that, Mary. And Mr. Garnett will see for himself, for Spilling's coming this afternoon to wish good-luck to Lally. Ye'll

see, Mr. Garnett; he's likely a little the worse, as I've said. But when a person can't take his wine, or his spirits, or whatever it may be, with a family, it's a pity and a worry; for ye can't always remember to have his aerated waters at his elbow, nor yet ye can't be forever runnin' after him with tea."

"All this has been a terrible bore to you, Claude," the Rector said, seeking his brother in that dragging hour when lunch was over, and it was not yet time for the bride and bridegroom to depart—"a terrible bore; but it will be soon over."

Claude reassured him politely. "All very interesting and amusing," he said, thinking the while, "My martyrdom of an afternoon—what is that to compare to yours for life, poor wretch? They are an exceedingly handsome family, Cecil," he added, aloud.

But Cecil gloomed at that, and shook his head. For reasons of his own, apparently, he did not find the personal beauty of his new connections a thing to be altogether grateful for.

"By-the-way, who is the gentleman, a friend of the family, never sober, who is to give us presently the pleasure of his society in his habitually inebriated condition?"

The Rector started, and glanced wildly around.

"They have not invited that abominable young man, Spilling! Surely not—surely! Even Mary would not venture to do that after what I have said of his scandalous behavior, and the disgrace his acquaintanceship is to respectable people."

"He is coming, however, I assure you. He is to arrive in a state of intoxication, and I have been particularly requested to note the fact of his tipsiness. Who and what is he?"

"He is an admirer of Mary's. The name of her admirers is legion. I think I told you that. A herd of swine—feeding. Yes—a herd of swine," said the Rector, with drooping head and indrawn lip.

"And Miss Burne, does she favor—?"

"She favors them all," Cecil said, solemnly interrupting and severely contemplating his brother with hard, bright eyes. "All—all—all! In the matter of admiration she is insatiable. I am sorry to seem to detract; but you asked me, and I must speak."

Claude Garnett smiled to himself as he turned away. "Between poor old Cecil and his beautiful sister-in-law evidently not much love is lost," he said.

Presently he found himself standing by Mary's side. A few smartly-dressed neighbors—the sons and daughters of the Midbor-

ough doctor, a few clergymen, and women from adjoining parishes, attracted by the sound of the Garnett name—were added to the party now, and were standing about examining the unimposing display of presents, and partaking of tea, coffee, and wedding cake. The bride formed the centre of one little group, her mother of another; for the moment Mary was alone, except for the companionship of Tona, one of the younger children, who, with one arm embracing the skirt of her sister's white dress, munched a piece of icing off the wedding cake at Mary's side. Miss Burne, as she stood abstractedly smoothing the hair of the little one at her knee, was looking across the room at the bride, who, with a flushed cheek and a shining eye, in all the conscious splendor of her wedding gown, which was also her first "really" long frock, was chattering away to two or three girls of her own age who were crowding around her. And on the elder sister's face as she looked Claude saw there was a mingling of love and pity and pride and regret.

More than a formal word or two he had not spoken to his sister-in-law. "The little creature is too painfully immature," he said to himself. "A poor little harmless soul with neither manner nor mind, whose place is in the school-room for many years to come. Poor Cecil! poor madman!"

Beyond the fact that she was his unfortunate brother's wife he felt no interest whatever in Lally. But Mary, standing silent, with thoughtful face, and that look of tender, half-mournful solicitude in her soft eyes, was a different matter. She drew him slowly but surely to her side.

She started when he spoke to her, although the voice was gentle enough, the manner less frigid than the manner of half an hour ago.

"I want to tell you of a great mistake I made this morning," he said. "Do you know that when I saw you coming up the church by your mother's side I took you for the bride?"

She smiled at him, with just a drooping of the corner of her lips. "That was indeed a foolish mistake," she said.

"Was it so foolish? It was with difficulty, even at that solemn moment, I refrained from complimenting my brother on his excellent taste."

"But what did you think of my taste?" Mary asked, and congratulated herself on having thus easily "paid back," as she put it to herself, "the one she owed him."

The drooping lids of the heir of the Garnetts lifted themselves.

Had she meant that for a rudeness? Yet the question had been put with a smile, not at all rudely—and—she would not dare.

"Did you think Mamie was going to marry old Cecil?" the child at her sister's side asked him, looking up into Garnett's face. Shyness and diffidence were certainly not attributes of the Burne family. Garnett found the unabashed little curly-headed mortal, with her large grave gaze, detestable. "Mamie would sooner cut her ring-finger off—wouldn't you, Mamie? he couldn't marry you then—and so would I—I would!"

"You had better cut out your wicked little tongue," Mary declared. She laughed, but she was not much displeased. "Cecil must preach a sermon to you from the text that little girls are not to speak about their elders," she said.

"Above all, not to speak the truth about them," Claude added, with a little offence.

The child wriggled her head free from the fingers which had been placed upon her lips.

"We hate old Cecil!" she said. "Mary and I do, and so does Mona and Tina and Irene. There's only Lally likes him. And she don't like him very much," she added, as an after-thought, and with her mouth full of the cake, to which she had again turned her attention.

At that moment a diversion, for which Garnett at least was disposed to be grateful, occurred. There was a loud scrunching of wheels upon gravel, and past the end windows of the drawing-room flashed a vision of two huge horses, a black and a bright bay, driven tandem, of a conspicuously painted vehicle, of a couple of grooms in terra-cotta liveries springing from their seats. There was a great noise of plunging and stamping and shouting as the horses, apparently not too manageable, were pulled up at the door, and presently the sound of a heavy foot, and a thick loud voice in the hall, and the throwing open of the drawing-room door.

CHAPTER IV

BOB TAKES HIS ANSWER

"THE inebriate friend of the family," said Garnett to himself prophetically, and turned a wearily disgusted look of inquiry upon Mr. Herbert Spilling entering.

He saw a man still quite young, and who had started in his career as a very handsome and pleasant looking fellow, as well as a very rich one, but who had sacrificed his beauty to the cause which had cost him his health, his manhood, his appointed work in the world, his proper place among men—the cause of drink. He was now, at not much more than thirty years of age, heavy of figure and bloated of face. His eyes seemed to look out at you through the haze which habitually obscured his brain. His voice was hoarse and thick, his manner and bearing had accommodated themselves to that of the class with which alone he had doomed himself to associate. He was very fond of dress, and something in the cut of his garments marked him as the man who was also fond of horses. He was never so tipsy that he forgot to fix a hot-house flower in his coat.

As he shook hands with Mrs. Burne, and came with his slow and heavy tread, that yet had something feeble and uncertain in it, down the long drawing-room, he was watched with a rather startled interest by most of the people there, for Mr. Spilling was more used to frequenting the hotel bars of the locality than its household hearths. As he had entered at one door the bride had swiftly rustled out from the other. Claude Garnett had seen the command to her to do so telegraphed from her sister's eyes. He kept his place by Mary's side as the new-comer approached; the color which had flashed into her face as the man had entered, making her beauty dazzling for the moment, had slowly faded, leaving her lovelier still.

"So you sent back my present, Miss Mary," Spilling began, in the thick loud voice; it was a good-natured voice as well, and although he complained of treatment so derogatory to his dignity, it was evident that he bore no malice—"you sent back Lally's present. What did you do it for?" he asked.

"We thought it too costly a present for my sister to accept," Mary said, gently.

Garnett, standing by with some idea of protecting her from the objectionable intruder, approved rightly of the act complained of; he was surprised and disgusted at the humility of her explanation.

"Who thought so?" Spilling went on. "What was its cost to me? I'd promised her a handsome present. 'Twasn't Lally that thought so—nor yet her father and mother, I'd lay my life. 'Tis you, Miss Mary. And I didn't think you'd have treated me in such a shabby way."

"Indeed, Mr. Spilling, Lally could not have accepted such a present. Do not be angry. It was so good and generous of you—but—"

"Angry?" he repeated. Although his voice was loud his utterance was hesitating and indistinct; perhaps only Mary and Garnett, who stood close by, caught his words, although several people had strained their ears to listen. "Angry? I don't know that I'm angry. Only when a man spends £1000 to please a girl, and gets it chucked back in his face by another girl, he's a right to ask for an explanation, hasn't he?"

"Don't ask for it now or here. I don't want to explain to the whole drawing-room, Mr. Spilling."

"You shall leave it alone, then," he said, "and do as you like. You always have done as you liked with me, Miss Mary, and you always shall—and treatment you'd kick a man for you've got to put up with in a woman, don't you see? And from you there's nothing I won't put up with—gladly—that you know—that you know—"

It was very evident to Claude, looking disgustedly on, that the man was in a condition to support the character he bore. He was at once sorry for Mary in her embarrassing position, and angry with her that she made no effort to escape from it.

"Shall I take you to your mother, Miss Burne?" he asked, his habitual air of aloofness more marked than usual, cutting unceremoniously across Mr. Spilling's husky speech. The latter at once turned his attention to him.

"Oh, who are you? I don't think I have the pleasure of knowing you," Spilling said, beginning to pull with a hand which helplessly trembled at his fair moustache. He made an effort to hold his head up, and to look the other man fairly in the face, but his condition did not lend itself to a display of dignity, and he only succeeded in eying the gentleman before him with a very wavering gaze.

Very hurriedly Mary named the men to each other, and neither acknowledged the ceremony of introduction. Garnett did not even vouchsafe a glance to his new acquaintance, but still looked at Miss Burne as if awaiting her reply to his offer to take her away.

"Papa wants to see you, Mr. Spilling. I will send papa to you," she said. "Sit down here, will you, till he comes?"

She swiftly wheeled round a chair by which she stood; at the touch of it against his legs Spilling—protesting loudly that he wasn't tired, he'd rather stand, he'd go with her—subsided into it, and became suddenly very quiet as he watched Mary's tall figure receding from him down the long room.

As the door closed behind her Mary found that Garnett was at her side.

"Oh," she said, nervous and ashamed before him, "I am very sorry! He is a great friend of ours. He has been very good to us, but you see how he is—it is such a pity that he came."

"It does seem a pity—rather," Garnett acquiesced. "It would appear to be advisable to prevent his going where ladies are—"

"I do not mind," Mary said, quickly. "It does not hurt me to see him, and I am dreadfully sorry for him. But Lally must be kept out of his way. She might be—afraid of him. And Cecil would feel called upon to be disagreeable. He—Cecil—is in the dining-room talking to papa. Will you keep him with you for a time, Mr. Garnett, and send papa to me, and—oh, Bob!"

Another young man had entered upon the scene as Mary had uttered that little cry of relief and gladness. A young man attired in ill-built workaday clothes, and not at all as a wedding guest; a young man looking over-broad and red and rustic by comparison with Garnett's handsome and refined appearance. Yet at sight of this new-comer, who regarded the pair with a frowning brow and a face devoid of any geniality of expression, the look of trouble and embarrassment faded from Mary's eyes. She called his name with a glad lighting of her countenance, her lips curving deliciously over the uneuphonious monosyllable.

"Oh, Bob!" she said again, smiling but reproachful. "How long you've been! I sent for you directly we came from church."

"I was out," he said. "I came as soon as I could;" and indeed he appeared to be breathless with his haste. "What is it?"

She opened another door in the hall and drew him in with her, leaving Garnett to do her bidding with her father and brother-in-law if it pleased him. The room into which she led Burton was that

devoted to educational purposes. During Mary's time of tuition a governess had been kept in the family, but on the eldest girl attaining her seventeenth year her own education was declared to be finished, and she was called upon to impart her acquirements to her sisters. The experiment had proved not exactly a successful one. From the long succession of twenty-pounds-a-year governesses Mary had not learned much, and even the small amount of information she possessed she found it difficult to pass down to the others; so that the mental faculties of the little Burnes showed few of the indications betokening the progress of the infant idea.

The work of teaching was distasteful to herself; her pupils were nearly always refractory, and in that shabby and untidy room in which she now stood Mary had gone through many weary, unsatisfactory hours. She did not love the square-built, low-roofed room, carpetless and with splashes of ink on wall and floor and ceiling. In the establishment of Gaythorpe Hall too few servants were kept, and of these some were constantly leaving; all were cheap and worthless. Through the extra work and the excitement consequent upon the wedding, the staff had lost their heads and became demoralized and incapable. None of them had entered the school-room since the day before; the broken chairs were standing pushed back from the table as the children had sprung from them; books and torn-up exercises strewn the floor; even the blind had not been pulled up, and on that dull and dispiriting day a semi-darkness reigned in the place.

Yet was there light enough to show to Bob Burton Mary in her wedding bravery; while as for Mary herself, so that she felt the comfort of his presence in her difficulty, she did not particularly want to look at Bob.

"What is it?" he said.

"Oh, Bob, that dreadful Mr. Spilling is here, and of course he is tipsy. I wrote to you because I wanted to prevent his coming; and now he is here. Bob, I want you to get him away at once."

"At once?" repeated Bob, slowly. "And how do you suppose I am to do that?"

"I don't know that," she said, impatiently. "I know it must be done, and be done by you now, at once—this very minute! Do we want a scene here to-day? I tell you I am in agonies while he stays. How can one tell what a drunken man is going to do or say?"

"But," said Bob, leaning with his broad shoulders against the door and scowling heavily at the opposite wall, "this isn't the first

time Spilling's been here. Not long ago he was always hanging about. I suppose he wouldn't have come if you hadn't wanted him."

Mary's face flushed angrily. "You don't mean to do as I ask you?" she began. Then with one of her swift changes of manner she fell from pride to humility. "He has come, I know," she said, gently, "but it has not been because I have wanted him, Bob."

The scowl on the young man's face lightened ever so little.

"And who is the new fellow—him that looks like an ass with long legs—I saw with you in the hall just now?"

"It is Cecil's brother. Oh, such a heavy weight! For Heaven's sake, don't let us lose time in talking of Cecil's brother! Dear Bob, what has he to do with it?"

"I thought, perhaps, he'd have done instead of me," he said, slowly; but he turned his gaze from the wall now upon her face, and for all the boorishness and sullenness of his manner his eyes were full of the old adoration and the troubled appeal she always read there. He put off something of the moroseness of his manner, pulled himself upright, and laid a hand upon her arm. "I'll do what you want—of course I will—you know that. To get Spilling away. Is that all you want of me, Mary?"

"If you will be so very kind, Bob. You are always so good—"

"And after that I am to go, I suppose and that is to be the finish?"

"You are always so good," she repeated, vaguely, "so very good. I don't know what we should ever do without you."

"And do you mean to do without me, then, Mary?"

She was silent, but she did not greatly resist him as he laid his other hand upon her shoulder and drew her quite close to him. She felt that he was trembling; his breath came quickly. She was a tall woman; although so strongly and broadly built, he was no taller than she. His face, very close to hers, was on a level with her own.

"Mary, were you very angry last night?" he asked her in a whisper.

"Very, very angry."

"But you are going to forgive me? Yes, Mary. Yes, yes, yes!"

She shook her head in a moment's gravity, and then, as his face came nearer, her lips twitched and trembled in a half-suppressed smile till his fell upon and steadied them.

"It's all right?" he asked, and clasped her closer. It is surprising how, in such a breathless whisper, such a triumphant shout of joy could seem to ring. "It's all right, darling?"

Mary did not answer. Was it "all right?" or was it ridiculous, was it mad, was it impossible? She did not know. It only seemed to her in that moment inevitable, and she submitted as in a dream to the pressure of his trembling arms, and listened to the beating of his heart as it thumped against her own.

In the pause a distant door opened, and a voice of some one crossing the hall cried, "Mary! Where is Mary?"

"She is here," Bob whispered in breathless triumph, his voice thickened with emotion. Still clasping her with one arm, he stretched the other behind him and held the handle of the school-room door.

"Now—say a word to me, Mary. Just one," he pleaded; "say it's all right, dear."

"Oh, I don't know," she said, uneasily; and now she tried to draw back from him. "Bob—I *don't* know!"

"Does any one know where Mary is?" called the voice again, the voice of Mona, the third girl. "Mary, how ridiculous it is of you, keeping out of the way when everybody is wanting you," she continued, with rising indignation; and trying the lock of the school-room door and finding it fast, she shook the handle tempestuously.

"Quick!" whispered Bob, panting in his breath; "quick, darling. Yes or no? Yes, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes, then, since you will have it!" Mary cried aloud, startling Mona on the other side of the door, who straightway ceased to call upon her sister's name and stretched her ears to listen.

There was the silence of a minute (an age to Mona on the wrong side of the door), a long sigh, the soft rustle of a dress; then the opening of the door, and Mary on the threshold in her soft white dress, the round smoothness of her cheeks a little paler than usual.

She spoke to her sister with some asperity. "What in the world are you doing there?" she cried. "Go at once to Lally and help her to change her dress, and tell her I am coming."

"Was it to Claude Garnett you were talking in the school-room?" Mona demanded, with the impertinent curiosity of her years. "Some more people have come; the coffee is done, and mamma keeps ringing and ringing, and none comes in. There's ever so much to see to, and you must go and shut yourself up in the school-room to talk. And who was it you were talking to, Mary, pray?"

"I was talking to myself, of course," said Mary, with much composure.

In the Burne family it was held permissible to lie when necessary

or convenient. Mr. Burne himself did not do so, but he had not exerted himself to condemn the habit in his children. All women lied nowadays, he supposed. His mother had not done it, certainly, nor did his sister; but the latter was a very serious-minded woman, and it was possible she might have been pleasanter if she had. His wife certainly did not make herself offensive through over-strict adherence to truth, and his daughters had his wife for mother.

"You weren't talking to yourself at all, Miss Mary," said Mona inwardly as she went up-stairs. "You were saying 'Oh, yes, yes, yes', as if some one had been teasing you to say it. And there was a man in the school-room, I know, for I heard him sigh, and I know it was a man's sigh, and I think it was Bob Burton's. And Bob's ugly and clumsy, and he's poor, and never has any new clothes. I wonder what you'd say, Mary, if I went and shut myself up in the school-room with Bob Burton?"

CHAPTER V

AN ACCIDENT

WHAT arts were used by young Burton to attain the desired end Mary Burne did not trouble to inquire. For a little time the sturdy figure of the young man clad in the rough gray homespun remained in the drawing-room beside Herbert Spilling's chair, and during that time, to Mary's intense relief, neither of the Garnetts was present. Presently there came again the plunging of horses, the shouting to grooms, the crunching of gravel, and through the window a glimpse of bright bay and black horse-flesh, a flash of pink liveries, and an instant's impression of the familiar face of Bob Burton turned towards the room where Mary sat as he was whirled away by Spilling's side.

What a mercy it was to be rid of them! Yes—to be rid of both! For Robert Burton, son of the bankrupt paralyzed old man who farmed those acres which had once belonged to Orlando Burne, but which had now passed into more fortunate hands, had not been formed for social triumphs, however victorious he had been in love. On those occasions, which circumstance, happily for her, rendered very rare, when he and the object of his affections met in a crowd, Bob was stolidly insensible to every demand but hers on his attention, and indifferent to every duty but the self-imposed one to keep at the elbow of the woman he loved whether she desired his presence there or not, and to scowl with eyes of jealous hatred upon every other male who ventured to approach her.

These idiosyncrasies, displayed at local flower shows, bazaars, picnics, or such like tame diversions of the locality, had sometimes made matters unpleasant for Mary Burne, and had spoiled her enjoyment of that admiration, promiscuous and particular, which is a beautiful woman's due.

It was certainly a relief that he also was gone. In the future—the happily remote future—Mary would reward him in a way he would appreciate for the discretion he had shown in making himself so scarce on this occasion. In the mean time she contented herself with rejoicing at her freedom from embarrassing company, and began

to look about her with a view of enjoying herself as much as circumstances would permit. In the matter of enjoyment she had ever the knack of seizing the moment's gift, and was not only the happier woman for that, but the pleasanter to those about her.

It was evident to one who watched her that where Mary went smiles and laughter and good-humor awoke responsive; that the younger members of the family clung to and followed her; that the indolent, handsome mother leaned upon the eldest daughter; and that the head of the family, irresponsible and indifferent, referred everything as a matter of course to Mary.

And when the hour of departure came it was noticeable that, whereas the little bride said "good-bye" to the rest of her family with composure, and to her parents with unconcern, she clung to the eldest girl with a child's passionate affection, and being released from that embrace, gave herself up to unrestrained sobbing and tears, despite the knowledge that emotion did entirely destroy her beauty, besides being ridiculous on such an occasion, as the whole family had always considered.

As Claude Garnett looked on at that farewell, and noticed the proud command of herself which the elder girl displayed, and how, having hushed her sister with words of tender raillery, and put her in the carriage awaiting her and watched it drive away, she turned to him, more than ever beautiful, with the tears in her eyes and a brave smile on her lips, he said to himself, with an impulse of admiration and a pang of regret, that his brother, to choose as he had done between the sisters, had been indeed an ass.

"That girl may be, as Cecil implies, a flirt," he said to himself, "and the painful position she holds socially may compel her to flirt with boors; but there is in her the making of a splendid woman, and the maternal instinct is well developed in her, and she is beautiful enough for a queen."

It had been arranged that he should stay at the Rectory that night, and that he should dine at the Hall—an ordeal to which he looked forward with painful misgiving. He was, unfortunately for himself and other people, a person of exceedingly fanciful and fastidious tastes, and the society of the Burnes as a family was anything but congenial. It is possible that, differently circumstanced, he might have found amusement where now was only a painful shrinking of the sensibilities and a creeping of the flesh. But as it was, owing to the crazy alliance which his brother had formed, he felt himself disagreeably concerned in the vulgarity of the lady of the house,

in the precocity of the children, the forwardness of the girls, the mental feebleness and moral flabbiness of Orlando Burne. These were not merely people that he might listen to with amusement and recall with a laugh. They had, thanks to his brother, become *his* people. He was not one exactly to shirk his responsibilities, but he recognized them with a shudder.

After the departure of the bride, he betook himself to the Rectory for a few peaceful hours, and it happened that on his return to the Hall he was in a position to convey a piece of news in which all of the family were greatly interested.

When the eldest girl, who had been absent from the room on his arrival, appeared, she was assailed by a chorus of voices calling to her an unintelligible report of something untoward which had happened.

Mary stopped short at the door with a startled look. "Oh, Mary, there's been a bad accident; both are ever so much hurt, and perhaps one will die!" cried the children.

"Mr. Garnett's brought the news, Mary," the mother said. She smiled and looked pleasantly elated as she turned to her daughter. She was one of those placid, easy-going people who earn the reputation for being good-natured and kind-hearted by accepting the misfortunes of other people with perfect cheerfulness and impassibility.

"It's Bob and Herbert Spilling, Mary," Mona said, and she turned as she sat to watch the effect of that intelligence on her sister. "And it's Bob's the worst."

Mary neither moved nor spoke. She had grown pale to the lips, and she looked upon them all with horror in her eyes.

Claude Garnett crossed the room to her. "It is not so bad, I hope," he said, kindly. "Do not be alarmed. Mr. Spilling is said to have wrecked himself and friend going home. One or both are hurt—the reports are most confused—let us hope not severely. I heard it from the man who drove me here. That kind of person rejoices in a tale of horror—very likely it is nothing."

Mary's voice came back to her. "We will send at once to Midborough to hear," she said, and rang the bell and gave orders for a man to ride over instantly to Mr. Spilling's place to make inquiries.

"Mary's as white as her dress," said Mona, shortly after, critically examining her sister, as they sat at dinner.

Mrs. Burne laughed chidingly. "Shame on you for bein' so chicken-hearted, Mary," she said. "It 'ont be the first time by many Spillin's come to grief, and he's got plenty of money to pay for the breakages."

"I expect Bob's the one that's nearly killed," said Mona. She was not particularly hard-hearted, but she thought she had made a discovery with regard to young Burton, and she was anxious to see if her sister's face confirmed it. She was of an inquiring turn of mind. It was interesting to observe how a girl, whose lover had been broken to pieces in a recent accident, would comport herself.

To Claude Garnett Mary condescended to explain the cause of her pallor.

"I thought it was an accident to Lal—to my sister," she said; and, having vouchsafed that explanation, said little else. Nor did she more than pretend to eat, and Garnett noticed that the white ringless hand, playing nervously with the bread by her plate, trembled exceedingly.

Amid that noisy, chattering, laughing group Mary's sensibility pleased her neighbor. She was very fair, with that paleness of the cheek, with her bosom heaving beneath the white folds of her dress. He was not a man likely to be carried away by impulse, but the longing to steady the shaking fingers in his own came to Garnett. He talked to her very little and on indifferent themes, deeming that the kinder course, and his voice, which had seemed at first so cold and reserved, grew gentle and kind, and his frigid and distant manner became sympathetic and protective. Mary, who was used to the teasing and railing and inconsiderateness of family life, was grateful to him.

Long before her messenger could have reached his destination, a servant whispered in Miss Burne's ear that one of Mr. Spilling's grooms was waiting to speak to her.

Paler than before, Mary arose and appeared before the man awaiting her in the back regions. He had been sent at young Mr. Burton's request, he said. Mr. Burton was not able to write just then, because his arm was a little hurt, but he was anxious Miss Burne should know he was all right, or nearly so; that Mr. Spilling also would be himself again soon.

Mary's relief was great. If Bob had been killed, it was she who had sent him to his death, she had kept telling herself. That would have been the way in which she would have requited an almost lifelong devotion. And how would the broken and helpless old man at Ashfields have borne the death of his idolized only son?

It was a pity that only Mr. Spilling's groom should have been by to see how life and color flashed back into her face. But Mary Burne was a woman born to make fools of men, and even the gentle-

man of the terra-cotta livery was moved to admiration. She would have liked to pay him with money for that good news, but that cash was a commodity of exceeding scarceness in Gaythorpe Hall; the small pocket-money of the girls depending entirely on the sale of doves, tame rabbits, rats, and guinea-pigs, which they reared and disposed of when they could. Mary had no coin at that moment at her disposal, but with her own hands she fetched and opened a bottle of champagne, and filled for the bearer of the good news a frothing bumper. Charles, the groom, for his part, would have preferred the beer, which was his natural element, but he understood and valued the compliment.

"She's the right sort, your Mary is," he said, when she had turned her back, winking at the Hall cook, who leaned against the table at his side resting from her labors now, for the last dishes had been despatched to the dining-room. "And I suppose, my dear, if Burton could 'ave 'is way you'd be 'avin' a second weddin'; for I seen him th' other night a-kissin' and a-cuddlin' of the gal tremendous. In this 'ere fashion, 'Arriet, you know," flinging an arm around the neck of the hot, greasy, but smiling cook-maid.

"You wait till you're arst, Charlie!" she cried, but she did not resist the attention nor refuse to sip at the sparkling glass which the resplendent Charles held to her lips. "I ain't so fond o' kissin' in public, if Miss Mary is—and where'd you seen her a-doin' of it, pray?"

But the discreet Charles only winked at the frowzy-looking young woman as he finished his glass. "You come along the Midborough road at three o'clock Sunday, and if you'll be a-comin' as Mary was I'll do young Burton to a turn, I promise you," he said. "And I only 'ope, my dear, that my guv'nor 'ont go makin' a jelly of me d'reckly after as 'eve done of Burton."

"I heard you a-sayin' he was all right, Charlie."

Charles relinquished the fair creature he had held, and got up from the table.

"'E's a mash," he said, and he nodded his head with solemnity to the cook. "Tha's what po'r Burton is—a mash! 'Is leg's broke, 'is harm's broke, 'is ribs is *hall* broke. I don't know what the devil—savin' your presence, my dear—ain't broke in that po'r feller's carcase. An' what you 'eard me a-tellin' your Mary was lies—lies, and nothing' less. 'E swore me to 'em—po'r beggar—'e's a game un, Burton is. 'E was in horful pain—horful! and I done hanything to satisfy him—hanything! The guv'nor 'e pitched on

the sorfdest part of 'im—is 'ead ; e's unsensed for a bit, but there's a Providence to watch over sech as 'im, you know, my dear. Spillin's hallus been took care on—"

"And howiver did you escape, Charlie?"

Mr. Charles was about to relate with how much promptitude and foresight he and his colleague had jumped down, and thus averted a much more tragic accident, when Mary returned with a letter, which she asked him to deliver with all possible speed to Mr Burton.

"DEAR BOB" (the hurriedly-scrawled lines, dashed off in the fervor of her gratitude and the delight of her relief by Mary on her knees, ran),—"I am so glad—so glad you are not hurt! I was terrified. They said perhaps you were killed. I should have killed you! What would have become of me? So kind and sweet and dear of you to send. I am so happy now, and going to enjoy myself.—
Your own MARY."

That was all. But through hours and days and weeks of pain and suffering, through ages of weariness and weakness and discomfort, worse than active pain, it was poor Bob's only comfort. The two doctors who were with him indignantly and firmly forbade the presence of Charles, the groom, at his bedside until it was seen that it would be better for himself that the silent but agonized sufferer, who of all his tortured body could move only his head and one hand and arm, should in this thing have his way. When the interview was over, and Charles, looking very white and sick, had left the sufferer with Mary's letter grasped upon his breast, the poor fellow could not break the seal. And that being done for him, he lacked the strength to lift the sheet of paper, and when one of the hastily summoned nurses held it before the poor eyes, it was found that they were too weak and dim to read. Then as the lids fell sickly over them, and the tears stole through, the woman with a woman's instinct laid the letter for an instant on his lips before she put it back in the envelope and replaced it within the quivering fingers that closed so eagerly upon it.

After that the little note, to which its sender never gave another thought, never left him, but lay for all that weary time beneath his pillow, and sometimes—poor Bob—poor, simple, inexperienced country lad, knowing nothing of the ways of the world, of the inconsistencies and inconsistencies of women—upon his heart.

And Mary returned to her place at Claude Garnett's side a new creature; and in her way—a very dangerous way it was, only that

she meant no harm, and should not have been held accountable—she showed her appreciation of the consideration he had shown her in her anxiety and the delicate deference with which he had treated her in her fright and trouble.

It would have been terrible that Bob should die. She was astonished, now that the fear was dispelled, to remember with what a sickening feeling of pain and loss the possibility had filled her. But now that the young man was, as he had assured her, "all right," why Bob was back in his proper place in her mind, occupying, truth to tell, other and more engrossing subjects being well to the fore, a very small corner in it.

Claude Garnett was a more engrossing subject—of that there could be small doubt.

To begin with, he was a handsome man after a certain delicate ultra-refined fashion; and Mary, who was of artistic temperament, and loved beauty in any form, was by no means insensible to that charm, although she would have denied that it could have influenced her, and had often been moved to declare to her sisters and such girl friends as she had that she hated your handsome-featured men; that a man, let him be but broad and strong and manly, might have the face of an ogre for what she would care. Yet all the same, when the time came, she showed herself no wiser than the rest of the world in this respect, and proved herself in a condition to be pierced through the eye to the very heart by a proudly-chiselled nostril, a fine-cut eyelid, a handsomely-curved lip, a well-shaped, well-poised head. She was susceptible also to the charm of a well-trained voice, whose changes came to be all known and watched for by her; whose tones of cold dislike, of proud indifference, of sympathy, of friendship, of tenderness, stored themselves unconsciously in her memory; whose tones of love, once heard, were destined to stay in her heart while it beat.

Men who were gentlemen by tradition and birth—who unconsciously, in every trick of gesture, gait, manner, and speech showed the influence of generations of civilization and cultivation—such men were rare visitors in the Burne *ménage*. Men of the class of Robert Burton, though in most instances with more polish than he, posted in the ways of the polite world by mothers and sisters anxious above all things that Dick or Tom or Harry, next to being a good judge of horses, or successful in his business or profession, should be "a perfect gentleman"—such men as these were known by the dozen at Gaythorpe Hall.

And what easy victims they fell, those gentlemanly young lawyers, doctors, merchants, farmers of the neighborhood, to the fascination of Mary Burne! There was scarcely one of them who had not with more or less fervor and constancy worshipped at her feet. For Orlando Burne's eldest daughter was not only a girl whose beauty was unmistakable and undenied, but she was what was emphatically called among them "a jolly girl" and "a good sort," with no affectation—no nonsense about her; one who would make a joke or take one, neither "faddy" nor straitlaced; a girl a man could laugh with, and talk to, and make a chum of.

With such appreciative young men as these Mary had but to come and see and conquer. In the first hours of her acquaintance with Claude Garnett she felt and resented the difference at the same time that she felt and resisted the charm of the difference. At the commencement of their acquaintance Mary had been prejudiced against the Garnetts and their representatives. The only member of the family whom she knew (her new brother-in-law) she may have respected perhaps, but she certainly did not admire, while the rest, by their cool ignoring of Lally, and their slighting behavior to Lally's people, had considerably aroused Mary's ire. For in her—whence derived, who shall say, certainly not from her immediate forbears, the indolent, sleepy father, the gypsy mother, ignorant and unreflective as when a girl of sixteen she left her wandering life for the protection of the man whose wife she afterwards became—in Mary Burne were stores of latent ambition, dignity, and pride, so that slights and insults which fell away from the outer hides of the rest often pierced the girl's more delicate skin, causing her sharp stings of pain, and leaving a soreness and a bitterness for which she herself could hardly account.

Those monuments and painted windows and marble tablets in Gaythorpe Church, bearing his once honored name, the histories and traditions of her father's family—utterly worthless in his eyes—were secretly of great importance to Mary. And the poor girl's heart was torn between anger at the mother who by coming into the family had sullied such a fair record, and brought contempt upon her father's children's heads, and rage at the affronts and insults constantly shown that mother, herself incapable of feeling them, and too lazy to resent them if she had done so.

It was this mixture of feelings, this mingled pride and shame, which had led Mary, the unacknowledged head of the family, to disregard those rare opportunities offered her to make friends with

people in her father's station. She fancied cold looks, avoidance, sneers, where none were, perhaps, intended; and she dreaded patronage more than insult.

Yet when the formal young rector of High Church tendencies and aristocratic lineage, to the unbounded astonishment of the "county," which had produced many more eligible daughters for his consideration and approval, had lost his heart to the immature prettiness, the childish ignorance and irresponsibleness of the "little Burne girl," Mary had jumped at the chance for Lally.

Lally herself, truth to tell, had no active feeling in the matter except the chronic desire to get away anyhow from poverty and dullness and home—to get out into the world. She therefore accepted Cecil Garnett as a matter of course, and lay awake a whole hour that first night of her engagement laughing about the love-sick clergyman to her younger sisters, repeating to them what he had said, describing how he had looked, and how supremely ridiculous it had all been, and how she meant to insist on his taking her to all the London theatres on her honeymoon.

It was when the Rev. Cecil, not at all easily led, even by the little unsuitable mate he had chosen for himself, refused to promise compliance with this request that Lally presented herself, sullen-browed, to Mary, and announced her intention of breaking off her engagement. It was then that Mary by coaxings, by threatenings, and commands decided that the marriage should go on. Could not Lally see what a chance was opening for herself? Had she not known that she and all of them were living under a ban, outcasts from their rightful sphere, despised, insulted, avoided, their good looks thrown away, their future blighted, their lives wasted? And now that to one of them a chance of reinstating herself had come, was it for such baby reasons to be thrown away?

Lally opened innocent eyes and listened astonished to the exhibition of long pent-up wrath and bitterness and pride, which she could not in the least comprehend. She had set her heart on going to the theatres, she protested—it was the only thing she had wished to be married for—but was caught up and whirled away again by Mary's burst of enthusiasm. Regaining her equilibrium, and being again restored to the power of speech, the younger sister had remarked that it should be as Mary wished. She didn't much care one way or the other, she had said. She might as well be married, perhaps; only that Cecil did talk about such stupid things, and was always wanting to educate her.

"Let him try," said Mary, with a sardonic laugh. And indeed she herself had attempted that experiment and had failed.

Thus in Lally's marriage it was Mary who had triumphed, although the Rector little knew it. Then, having so satisfactorily arranged the affairs of her sister, she straightway proceeded to settle her own by promising to marry the least eligible young man among that army of ineligibles who had sighed at her feet, from which it will be seen that Mary Burne was rather less than more consistent than the generality of her not too reasonable sex.

The opposition of the Garnetts to Cecil's marriage Mary understood and had expected; but she resented it nevertheless, and it pleased her sometimes to discharge some of the arrows of scorn and ridicule appropriate to the original offenders at the head of the astonished representative of the family within her reach. So that that young Christian—not, for all his high opinion of himself, removed from the failings of less professing brethren—conceived and cherished a dislike of Mary Burne almost as powerful as his love of her sister.

And she had intended to extend to Claude Garnett the same unfriendly treatment, only that—

Only that Claude and Cecil Garnett were two different men—widely different, she thought them, but was deceived—and somehow she did not.

CHAPTER VI

THE GYPSY BLOOD

IN the morning it was known to Mary that poor young Burton had bought her peace of mind at the expense of truth, and she learned that Charles's account of the accident had been a shameless perversion of facts. Herbert Spilling's hurt was of a slighter nature, and it was pronounced that he would soon be himself again, little desirable as that resumption of personality might be; but his companion in misfortune was said to be so grievously injured that, although there was hope of his ultimate recovery, his illness was one certain to be of very long duration. He would not be in a condition to bear removal to his father's house for many, many weeks—perhaps for months to come.

Mrs. Burne, with her habitually cheerful way of viewing calamities, was of opinion that the accident would turn out to be a stroke of luck to the old man at Ashfields.

Mary turned indignantly upon her mother.

"He is his only son; he is in horrible pain; how can that be a good thing?" Her own face was pale, her eyes full of tears—for none of the details of the affair had been spared her.

That money was useful even in the healing of wounds, Mrs. Burne reminded her; that Spilling had plenty to spare, and Bob and poor old Burton were next door to paupers.

"And there's nothing for which money won't compensate—even for the loss of a son?" Mary began scornfully, and broke off because of the sob in her throat. The thought of the lonely and helpless old man, of Bob, that embodiment of health and strength, lying crushed and powerless, unnerved her.

She rushed swiftly from the room and her mother's exasperating cheeriness and sought her father.

The interests of Orlando Burne's poverty-stricken, restricted life centred now in the few pigs, goats, and fowls, which represented the sole property, really his own, on those heavily mortgaged few acres, which were left to him of his ancestral estate. He had been a horse-lover and a betting-man. The ashes of the passion he had nourished

for the nobler animals he now bestowed on hens and chickens, and for the interests of the race-course were substituted the chances of the rise and fall in pork.

Yet on rare occasions, when over an extra glass of wine, he would brighten into talk, it was always of those far-off days when Gaythorpe had been his father's, and there had been a couple of hunters in the stable for Orlando's use, and the best preserved shooting in the country for his amusement. When he sat silent of an evening, his glass of cold spirits-and-water beside him, his pipe in his mouth, his idle slippered feet extended on a chair before him, and his wife and daughter chattering around, it is possible he did not hear their talk; that he was recalling such and such a run with the foxhounds, of such a day's pheasant shooting in the Ashfields woods. Mary had noticed with a pang of pity and pain how his dull eyes would lighten, how easily his words would come, how perfect was his recollection of every incident of those lost days—days before he had fallen such an easy victim to malign influence, had ruined himself and his father on the race-course, had completed the destruction of himself and of those who were to bear his name by the fatal marriage upon which he had entered in his habitual spirit of dull acceptance of the easiest thing rather than through the promptings of passion.

He was affected with no remorse for that ruinous ineffaceable error nor for all those old stupid besotted misdeeds of his. The shallow gaze of his light blue eyes was never seen to be clouded with a shade of reflection or hazy with the memory of trouble. At fifty years of age his handsome face was as handsome as at thirty, and as unmarked by thought as a baby's. Perhaps he was too intensely indolent to have any feelings at all, and he gathered his eggs of mornings, attended to his setting hens, counted his young ducks by the pond with a complacency which showed his ambition to be entirely satisfied by the act.

Mary found him in the garden carrying a large Aylesbury duck under his arm and a basket of eggs in his hand.

"Look here," he said, opening his round clear eyes upon his daughter, "I've found where the old beggar lays at last. She'd made a nest under the honeysuckle in the kitchen-garden—look here, twenty-two eggs—right under! And that within a dozen yards of the out-house that's swarmed with rats. Lucky I found her. Right under the honeysuckle!"

"Very wise of her. A pleasanter place to lie hid in than in the old hen-house, which is—well, not quite so agreeably odorous as the

honeysuckle. Papa, Bob Burton is, after all, seriously hurt, and there is something which you must do at once. I will set the duck for you. Give me the duck, papa; give me the eggs."

She took the basket from his unresisting hand, but he clung to the body of the Aylesbury and looked with a kind of vacant doubtfulness at his daughter's face. Mary was always proposing something unpleasant for him to do; what the dickens did she want of him now?

"You must go at once to see Bob, and you must say that I sent you, and that I am—we all are—horribly sorry. And tell him to be of good courage and to get well, and that I will see to his father. Tell him all that you can think of to cheer him. Let me set the duck. I will get some fresh straw. I know exactly how to do it."

But Mr. Burne clung with feeble tenacity to the wretched bird, most anxious for her sake to make her escape, filling the air with loud quacks of woe. "I've got a long morning's work," he murmured. "I shall have to divide the eggs; and how do you know which is the old hen I've got in my mind to put some of 'em under? And you're right about the hen-house; it wants doing out with lime. I think I may as well set about it, and you can write all that to Bob Burton, of course you can; it's a much better plan and easier—and— How the deuce do you suppose I'm to get over to Midborough this morning, Mary?"

The last in a very aggrieved tone, for Mary, having watched her opportunity, had made herself mistress of the duck. It was a foregone conclusion that Mr. Burne would give in and do what he was told, not from any particular desire to please, but because of the trouble involved in persistent refusal.

And Mary, for her part, fulfilled to the best of her ability her undertakings on the part of the duck, who quite thankfully sat down upon the half of her treasure amid the malodors of the hen-house, nor seemed to regret the honeysuckle at all; after which, for the making of another nest, it was necessary to fetch an armful of clean straw. For that she must cross a corner of the park and traverse the Ashfields orchard, where the pink and white blossom, so late this year, had been beaten from the trees by the late rains and lay in white patches upon the long wet grass, to gain the stackyard where Bob Burton had threshed his last of last year's wheat stacks.

In such small accommodations as a bundle of straw, a truss of hay, a little fresh corn for his chickens or fodder for the pigs—for greater than these, if the truth were told—Orlando Burne depended upon the

good-nature of his neighbors. It had, indeed, become so much a matter of course to do so, and the loan had become so considerable, that he had long ceased to be grateful or to dream of paying it back. The one riding horse kept at the farm was more often at the service of the Hall people than of its owners. (Mr. Burne had had it saddled as a matter of course, but now to ride over on his visit of condolence to its master.) The kitchen-garden, kept in perfect order by Bob's own hands, supplied the place to the Burnes of their own neglected one. Poor Bob, as he pruned his fruit-trees, weeded and salted his asparagus beds, watered his strawberries, took delight to himself that it was for Mary, and grudged not his labor at all; for her sake being even grateful for the depredations of the younger members of the family and welcoming the cool importunities of Mr. Burne.

So Mary, her conscience hardened by evil practices long continued, ran across and stole the straw without a scruple, and coming from the orchard into the park again discovered the tall figure of Claude Garnett awaiting her.

To most girls the thought would have at once occurred that at the Hall, after the disarrangement of yesterday, nothing was in order for a visitor, that her own cotton dress was not so fresh as it had been a week ago, that she was bare-headed, and her hair possibly disarranged by the damp morning breezes. But none of the Burnes were in the habit of troubling themselves about the effect they were likely to produce, and Mary especially was too undeniably beautiful to require to think at all about her appearance. About her thick brown hair there was always a latent curliness, and the wind and the moisture, which would have been destructive to the carefully waved tresses of less fortunate young women, served only to bring into prominence this charming characteristic. Her run through the morning air had only heightened the brilliancy of her coloring, and added a sparkle to the long-shaped eyes which the heavy shading of the curled lashes made so dark and so soft.

She laughed and shook her head when, in a somewhat embarrassed and hesitating fashion, he asked to relieve her of her bundle of straw, and the sun, glancing through the watery clouds at that moment, sparkled in her eyes and gleamed in her strong white teeth, and added a touch of gold to the curling tips of her bronze hair, and glorified even the crumpled pink dress so simply draping the large perfect figure and the great bundle of straw tucked under the shapely arm. So that Garnett was astonished afresh at her beauty, and felt his heart shake within him.

"I must apologize for my early visit," he said to her, as they walked beneath the trees and hearkened to the sound of the cow-slips striking against their feet and rustling softly to the sweeping of the hem of Mary's dress. "The morning seemed very long to me. My brother apparently possesses no books but theological ones; the *Times* is two days old; in his garden there is nothing more inviting than flowerless flower-beds and shadeless gravel-walks leading to nowhere. I ventured into the village, where the children pointed at me and the boys hooted. Two young women standing at the four crossways were seized with uncontrollable laughter at my appearance. They made some audible observation, not flattering, I am sure, but which I was careful not to catch. This experience warned me not to venture farther alone. I repented of my resolve to stay for the evening train, went back to hunt for a time-table, failed to find one, and came on here."

"I'm not sure that we can find you a time-table," Mary said. "We never by any chance can find anything that is wanted. But I can easily make out for you the time of your earliest train."

"Thank you," he said, with much deliberation. "Now that I am here, and if you don't object to my staying, I think I will adhere to my original plan. By doing so shall I be hindering you in any way?"

"Indeed you will not," she assured him, composedly; "for the name of the things I have to do is legion, and I shall certainly do them whether you are with me or not."

"Perhaps I might be allowed to help you in your labors. To be of use in any way would give me a great deal of pleasure."

"And would be quite a new experience for you, I expect," she said, gravely.

Her companion gave her a momentary glance, but did not smile. He objected to the chaffing propensity in women. As a rule they discontinued their efforts in that line after the first attempt.

"Perhaps you would like to have some idea of what are the multifarious duties you are rashly pledging yourself to share with me," she proceeded.

But he begged that she would not enter into detail. "Lest my spirit fail," he said; "let me meet each labor singly as it comes."

Whereupon she ran through a list of things to be accomplished within the hour, which, unless she had, Joshua-like, commanded the sun to stand still, could not possibly have been crowded into the day's work.

He listened in respectful silence. He was not exactly sure if she were laughing at him still, and he hated to make a mistake; therefore his regular-featured face, which could be very mask-like when he so willed it, expressed nothing.

"I really believe he thinks I have to peel the potatoes and weed the onion-bed and wash up the dirty plates and dishes," Mary said to herself, a little piqued. "I've a good mind to do it, too, and to make him help."

But having flung down her bundle of straw at an out-house door, having fetched herself a hat from the hall, "Now, come," she said; "we will begin with the first and most important item on our list—"

"To feed the pigs, I think," he reminded her, with polite gravity.

"To go to see poor Mr. Burton—Bob Burton's father, you know."

"But that—excuse me—was not on your list at all."

"Odd, isn't it, as that happens to be the one and only thing I am going to do."

"Do you always fall so wofully short of your undertakings?" he asked her, as they retraced their steps.

"My programme is generally liable to alteration," she admitted. "It makes the performance, when it comes, more interesting, don't you think?"

"And always to do the unexpected. Is that your rule?"

"Rule? I have no rule. There is not one in the family," she assured him. "You think that regrettable, perhaps? From some points of view it is. But it is pleasant."

"What is pleasant isn't always safe, Miss Burne," he said, gravely. The heir of all the Garnetts was neither an original thinker nor a brilliant talker. Truth to tell, he had rather a terror of originality, and possessed a mind almost as formal as his manner. The exaggerations of Mary's talk, until he became accustomed to her extravagant style, were a constant embarrassment to him, even although he felt himself interested in spite of himself. It appeared to him that exactness of moral rectitude could not be coincident with laxity in speech.

"But it is wise—or it ought to be," she retorted. "The greatest wisdom in the world is to be happy, and to be happy you must be free."

"And lawless, according to you."

"Not that so much as independent of conventionalities and hypocrisies and humbugs."

"Ah! Your ideal existence would be that of a gypsy in a cara—"

He stopped, horrified at the slip he had made, and the color deepened uncomfortably in his face.

"In a caravan," Mary said, catching him up quickly and quietly. Glancing at her, he saw with grievous compunction that she had paled to the lips. "You are quite right. It is the gypsy blood in my veins, you see."

"And you are right," he went on hastily, anxious to ignore her words, and to make amends for his. "A free and independent existence must have its charms for all of us—those of us, that is, that have no ties binding us to the wheels of society, to the tiresome routine of everyday life; those of us who are fortunately untrammelled by—by—"

He did not get along very glibly, and Mary cut him short ruthlessly. She turned her face to him, and although it was pale, he saw that it was bravely set, and that the eyes were shining. There was a subject very near her heart, but on which she had not spoken to mortal man, a subject which of all others she would have avoided in this intercourse. Yet now there had come to her the impulse to rush into it. She saw by the confusion of his manner and heard by the stumbling of his tongue that the family history was known to him; she would compel him to see that she at least was not ashamed.

"You know that my mother was a gypsy girl?" she said.

"I know it," Garnett admitted, with a hanging head. He was horribly uncomfortable—sorry, but angry, too. The girl was too daring; she had no right to put him into such a hole as this.

"And I suppose you think, and your people think, your brother mad to have married into our family? I want you to know that we see and quite understand that—quite. For we—you will be surprised to hear it, perhaps—we have our pride, too."

He believed that there was great pride of race among the gypsies, Garnett said, tamely, searching about in his mind for something inoffensive to say, and not making a very happy selection. He had been told that there were gypsies who had proudly refused to mingle their blood with—

But Mary was not in the mood for polite evasions.

"My mother was not of that royal kind of gypsy," she said, cutting his inanities short with a satirically curling lip, and with an uncalled-for frankness, as painful to him as to her. "There is a quite inferior order, a debased and mongrel race that sells bootlaces and skewers, and gets its living by stealing chickens and by poach-

ing. I have not, I need scarcely tell you, made inquiries, but I think it too probable that I am descended from such as these."

She lifted her head as she said it. Perhaps she knew that she had the air of being descended from a queen.

"It's all a matter of small moment nowadays," he said, in the minute's awkwardness giving utterance to a sentiment he hated. "Soon it will be of even less importance. When all class distinctions are swept away, and all our inherited possessions, a man who has nothing but his ancestry to boast of will have to sing exceedingly small—"

"And will have to steal chickens for a living."

"Or to cease to live."

"Yes. I suppose that appears to you a preferable fate. For myself, I am at present rather in love with life. I shall live while I can—anyhow. If not by fair means by foul. (Oh, dear! oh, dear! Do me the justice to believe that that was an involuntary pun.) I have even ideas of enjoying myself when the chance comes my way."

"To such a beautiful woman the chance is sure to come," he said, gently, and then silence fell between them for a while.

He was endeavoring to think of a subject removed as far as might be from the uncomfortable theme upon which they had fallen, when Mary began again.

"And you? What do you intend to do with your life?" she asked him.

"What will my life do with me? My lines are somewhat straightly marked. My father—has Cecil told you of him?—he hunts a little, shoots a good deal, goes to church once on Sundays, has his neighbors to dine a few times in the year, victimizes himself to dine with them when it is so ordained, sits on the magistrates' bench, is chairman of two or three local boards—all that does not sound very interesting to you, perhaps? Sooner or later I shall step into his shoes. What he has been I shall be."

"One might almost as well be poor papa, with his goats and pigs; but of course there is a great deal that you have left out."

He shook his head. "Really, I think not," he said, conscientiously. "He used to take my mother and sisters up to town for the season, but things have altered now for poor land-owners, and—"

"Ah! There are your mother and sisters. You will have to marry."

"Oh yes. I suppose so."

"Whether you like it or no?"

"I shall probably like it—let us hope so—when the time comes."

"But whether you like it or no, you will have to do it?"

"Oh, well—the common fate."

"You speak of it as if it were like death—inevitable, and very horrid. Now, at present we—you and I—can only say of each state that it is inevitable. Let us take comfort to our souls. Neither may be so unpleasant as it looks. Have you forgotten the bridegroom's face of yesterday?"

"Poor old Cecil!"

"He is so solemn about everything."

"Even marriage?"

"It is so silly and so dull. In the pulpit and out of it he preaches to us that every action of our lives is fraught with tremendous consequences."

"And don't you believe him?"

"Oh, I dare say. But that kind of thing is paralyzing if one gives one's self up to it. I do not desire to have my movements hampered by such considerations."

"Is it better to go your own irresponsible way, not caring what mischief you make for yourself and others?"

"It is best to do what seems pleasantest for yourself and others, and leave it. With all his preaching even Cecil can't do more. And now, what is to become of you while I am at Ashfields? It will be better for you not to go in."

Claude at once expressed his willingness to wait for her with no *empressement*, but with that mixture of shyness, remoteness, and deference which made up his ordinary manner, and which Mary found by no means unpleasing.

But old Burton, whom they found standing at the gate of Ashfields, leaning upon two sticks and miserably looking up and down the road, would not allow Miss Burne's companion thus to wait.

CHAPTER VII

BOB'S FATHER

"I was thinkin', happen, some one would come by that had heard the last news of my boy," Bob's father said, by way of explaining his presence at his own gate.

His voice was thick and toneless; his words were enunciated with the greatest difficulty, two or three jumbled into one or clipped and mutilated past recognition. The paralysis which had rendered his limbs all but helpless had also drawn and disfigured his face, so that it was painful both to look at and to speak to him.

"I came to talk to you about Bob," Mary said, with great gentleness of manner. "Dear Mr. Burton, we are all so sorry—and I am sorriest of all."

The old man—he was not an old man after all, but had been in the prime of life when his malady struck him down only a few years ago, but looked positively decrepit now—made an unintelligible ejaculation, and being too full of grief for words or politeness, turned his back on Mary, and began with the help of his crutch and stick to shuffle down the garden-path to the house.

"Come in," he said to Mary when he reached the door. "Come in, my dear. Tell him—tell the gentleman to come in."

Mary did not convey that invitation. For some reason she did not desire the presence of Claude Garnett at Ashfields; but the old man, who respected the rites of hospitality even in his preoccupied state, paused on the threshold and waved to him to enter.

This Garnett did slowly, and old Burton being seated, his sticks by his side, Claude put out a long delicate hand and grasped the huge trembling one which lay on the paralytic's knee, and said that he had been exceedingly sorry to hear of young Mr. Burton's accident, that he hoped it would prove after all to be a slight one, and that the young man would have a speedy recovery.

Whereat Burton turned aside his face with a choking noise in his throat, while the tears ran down his distorted cheeks.

In Mary's eyes, standing beside him, the tears had risen. She laid a kind hand upon his shoulder, and said in a low voice a falter-

ing word or two. But her tongue was tied by the presence of the other man. She had said nothing to him of her sorrow; he would think it all a sham. Why was he there? He had nothing to do with any of them. He did not care in the least—why should he?—for Bob's accident and the poor old father's sorrow. He was thinking what a distressing object the poor man was to sit and look at, and feeling horribly uncomfortable at those odd choking noises in the poor old throat, and bored by his effort to catch the meaning of the words that fell from the dragged lips.

All this Mary felt with an amount of irritation quite out of proportion to the cause, and so was ill at ease, and eloquent only with her hand, which fell from Burton's shoulder at the pathetic invitation of the open palm upon the poor old fellow's knee, and lay there locked in his.

"It's the last trouble, my dear," he said—"the last and the worst. Everything else had happened—wife, money, health, all gone, and now my boy—my boy that was so young and strong—to be a cripple—a cripple like me."

At that Mary cried out "No!" sharply, and forgot Garnett for the minute in her distress at the unwelcome thought. Burton, overcome with the anguish of his foreboding, said no more, and the pair sat with him in uncomfortable silence, and watched his shaking head and the tears that dropped painfully from his eyes.

Soon Garnett's gaze strayed from the wreck of the once sturdy figure, and wandered over the room; and Mary's eyes, without leaving her old friend's face, seemed to see with those of Claude the scene upon which his rested. The comfortable and homely room, with its worn horse-hair sofa and chairs; its square dining-table covered with a flimsy green cloth; its carpet, once bright-hued and florid of design, now, not regrettably, faded, showing still its green ground and its pink flowers and brown fern-fronds in patches under sofa and chairs; the stiff scarlet curtains of a material to set the teeth on edge; the few not admirable relics of the lost mistress—yellow and violet wool antimacassars—still religiously preserved over the backs of chairs, "birds'-nest" mats of the same color and material supporting a water-carafe and a lamp on the side-table.

When the son of the house was at home there was a welcome litter of papers, of books, of writing-materials; his dog lay upon the hearth, the windows were flung wide. The airlessness, the silence, the neatness, had made a commoner place of the homely room.

In a rack by the side of the master of the house some long clay

pipes were stuck—pipes which the poor man could no longer enjoy; his useless tobacco-jar of pewter stood still on the chimney-piece over his head. On the green-papered walls some wretched prints of Landseer's less desirable pictures, a brightly-colored Little Red Ridinghood of a many-years-ago *Graphic*, a photograph of a small pugnacious-looking Bob of tender years and a nigger cast of feature and complexion—a proud representation of the son of the house taken in his mortar-board in his first year at Midborough Grammar School—evidenced the artistic tastes of the inmates.

Mary had always taken the room as a matter of course before. Such as it was, it figured among the earliest and happiest recollections of her childhood. For Mrs. Burton, a large-hearted, bright-natured woman, with a great pity for the neglected little tribe running wild at the Hall, had been Mary's especial friend. She had encouraged the child to go to her with her torn frocks and buttonless gloves to be put in order. Later she had taken pains to teach the girl how to perform those necessary offices for herself and her younger sisters. In those early days Mary's greatest treat was to escape from the helter-skelter of the Hall family meals to "go to tea" with Bob Burton's mother. She remembered how astonishing to her, at that early age, had been the quiet orderliness of the place—a quality she had attributed particularly to Ashfields, having no experience to teach her that it obtained elsewhere. How strange it seemed to her to find meals punctual and properly cooked, to find table-cloths without holes, and to find a sufficiency of plates! How wonderful it was that in Mrs. Burton's pocket there was always money enough to buy her any childish trifle that Mary's small soul ardently desired!

To her husband and son Mrs. Burton's loss had been irremediable, unutterable, the beginning and the crown of sorrows; but they had been men with men's self-restraint and shame of emotion. It was only Mary—both of them always remembered—who had wept for her with a noisy grief whose violence there for long had been no assuaging.

About this room, as divested of such associations, she had not thought until she had felt Claude Garnett's eyes wandering round the familiar place, and then how mean, how vulgar, how sordid it had become! Old Burton, too, not looked at as the kind and generous friend of her childhood and youth, dear husband of the woman who had been to her more motherly than her own mother, was only a common old countryman after all! In all his crippled person there was no indication but of that: in the rough iron-gray whiskers

and beard surrounding his face like a mangy boa, in his broad-featured face, in his short thick hands and feet, in every word and look and gesture, these things were, and always had been, writ large.

A broken-down, bankrupt old man, with surroundings whose shabbiness alone preserved them from glaring vulgarity!—was it possible—was it possible that she—she whose sister was married but yesterday to the brother of the man beside her, the man who, for all her misfortune of birth, for all her wretched upbringing, was as deferential to her as if she had been born a queen—that she who had eyes and ears, and tastes and perceptions, had promised to marry this old man's son?

When she had done that thing, she surely had been a madwoman!

And, let alone all other considerations, it was happily impossible. It would not only be a wrong to Bob himself, tied hand and foot, without a penny between earth and sky to call his own, not only a wrong to the poor harassed father, burdened already beyond his strength—it was impossible!

What had possessed her to give that foolish promise? Bob, when he was well, must acknowledge the absurdity. Nay, even now—poor Bob!—he must see it.

And then the door was slowly pushed open, and Bob's dog, a decrepit bull-terrier which had been given to him as a puppy in his boyhood, came wandering in. He smelt about the room for his master, and, finding him not, came and settled himself stiffly on his haunches upon Mary's skirt, and looked up piteously, with bleary eyes, into her face.

"He howled all night—he wouldn't let me sleep for howling all the night through," Burton said.

When Mary got up to leave she took the old dog with her.

"He is mine, you know," she said; "Bob gave poor Tim to me—he would like me to have him now."

Burton squeezed, in a gush of tenderness and sorrow, the hand he held. "You're the light of his life," he said, the tears again running down his face. He was not often moved to poetry, but mind and body were feeble now, and he was liable to feminine outbursts, tears, and sentiment. "She's the light of his life," he said, turning to Garnett. "The very light of Bob's life."

He made a desperate effort to make himself intelligible, and Garnett, perceiving this, bowed with a politely interested air, but as all that reached his ears was a guttural sounding, "She's li' his li'—li'

Lob's li'!" he was not much the wiser; only thankful presently to be beyond the reach of the poor man's gibberish, to be relieved from the irksomeness of the effort to understand.

"It is sweet of you to be so friendly to that poor old fellow," he said to his companion as they walked away. "He has lived under your father for a long time, I suppose?"

"He has lived at Ashfields for over thirty years. Bob—his son—was born there. The farm does not belong to us, you know. Nothing belongs to us now, I believe; but Ashfields was the last to go."

"Mr. Burton appears to be one of the good old sort," he said, anxious to get away from the subject of her father's losses.

Mary took objection to something in the tone. "I have noticed that people like that, who have had no success in life and not much pleasure, and who are quite without self-assertion, are called 'of the right sort' by people like you. I don't know why they should be 'of the right sort.' I should like them in those things to be of quite a different sort. But Mr. Burton is the best and kindest neighbor," Mary said, with warmth. "I am very fond of him and grateful to him. I *loved* his wife."

"And so you have burdened yourself with his son's dog?"

He looked down at the rheumatic old creature crawling along at Mary's side. She had drawn her handkerchief through his collar; he appeared to be following her as a matter of necessity, and not with any elation of spirit.

"He disturbs Mr. Burton at night," Mary said; and added, curtly, after a pause, "besides, he is mine. Bob gave him to me."

"A valuable gift!" Garnett said. He stooped and patted one of the animal's pointed ears, who, blinking at that mark of attention, glanced at Mary as much as to say, "Look at the liberty he's taking with me; don't allow it, please," and turned away his head.

"What is his name, pray?"

"His name is Tim—Timothy—for short," Mary said.

Then she also turned away her head. She did not want to talk of Tim or his master to Claude Garnett, but she thought of the day when the dog had become hers.

It was some time ago now that young Burton had walked across to the Hall, the poor old dog following as usual at his heels, had silently pulled from his pocket a brand-new chain, had attached it to the brand-new collar which clasped the creature's neck, and on which, to Mary's surprise, she discovered her own name engraved, and had put the chain into her hand.

"Look here," he had said, stolidly—his voice was generally rough, and his manner always the very reverse of sprightly—"I want you to have Tim, will you? You always liked him. I want him to be yours."

"But, Bob," she had demurred with wild-eyed astonishment, "you must not part from Tim. You know he is the most precious thing you possess!"

"He is the most precious thing I have to give away," he had answered. "I can't do more than give you the best thing I've got—can I? I want you to take him, please."

And Mary, seeing that refusal would give him more pain than acceptance, had reluctantly acquiesced.

But Tim did by no means acquiesce, and was never Mary's for longer than she kept the chain about his neck, but was wont to slip off to Bob with such persistence that at length it was found to be mere waste of time to send him back again.

But perhaps Bob, for his part, may have derived some satisfaction from the fact that the dog he caressed, which lay with its heavy loving head upon his knee, or followed so faithfully at his heels, still bore Mary's sacred name upon the collar at its neck.

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE RECTORY

A SHORT time after the return of the Cecil Garnetts from their honeymoon a letter was received from the Rector's elder brother, intimating his readiness to come at an early date and pay his respects to his sister-in-law in her new home. Cecil looked up from the perusal of this epistle, which his wife, quite unimpressed by its importance, had handed across the breakfast cups to him, with a very gratified expression of face.

"What a good fellow Claude is!" he said, with enthusiasm. "He is offering to do what is really repugnant to him for the sake of giving us pleasure."

"Oh, if it's so horrid to him I'm sure we can do without him," Lal said with a pout. She had been married for several weeks, but in spite of the advantages of her position she occasionally did and said foolish things and impulsive things still. "I mean," she went on, having caught her husband's reproving eye, "whatever shall we do with him, Cecil? Now that I'm married, I don't suppose he'd find me a bit amusing. Of course he can go up to the Hall—to the girls—but he didn't look the sort to get on with them, and—"

"My brother certainly is not of that sort," said the Rector, the corners of his lips drooping. "He is a different order of man from those with whom your sisters have been allowed to make friends. Mr. Robert Burton and he have not much in common; Mr. Spilling—"

"Oh, as for that," said Lally, flippantly, cutting him short, "you can't tell of what order men are, you know. You've got to wait till they show you. I don't see any reason to expect he's different from other men."

"He is a gentleman," Cecil reminded her severely.

"Gentlemen sometimes like to have pretty girls to talk to," said Lal, the daring. "I dare say he wants to come to flirt with Mary."

After that bold flight, she tried, but unsuccessfully, to encounter, unwavering, the stern gaze of grieved surprise in the deep-set, coldly-shining eyes across the table. By that expression of sorrow, rather

than anger, Cecil could always overthrow his wife. Her eyes fell and her lips trembled, but she went on with the heedlessness of the desperate.

"Why shouldn't he, pray? Our Mary is quite handsome enough to make fools of better men than he. I don't see that he's so wonderful if he is your brother. Most likely he's head over ears in love with her—they all are when she wishes. And she generally does wish—"

"Are you aware," he said to her, with great distinctness of enunciation, and with that tightness of the lip which denoted extreme displeasure—"are you aware you are giving your sister the character of a common flirt—of a vulgar, common flirt?"

"She is not vulgar or common," cried Lal, starting up with her eyes aflame. "How dare you tell such a wicked falsehood about Mary! I wish more were like her, then. I wish I had never left her! I wish you were half as nice and not so solemn, and so—so preaching—and so very unkind!"

Whereupon the voice that had risen with anger and shaken in sobs broke, and Lavarina was in tears, not for the first time by many since her marriage.

She cried for quite a length of time as if her heart was broken, for fully three minutes. Her husband, sitting very upright at the other end of the table, regarded her in silence, with great severity and sorrow of face, but with a saving expression of yearning affection in his steel-blue eyes.

Presently that happened which in their brief experience of married life had always happened. Still sobbing noisily, Lally arose, knocking over as she did so the chair on which she had been sitting, and, making a blind rush across the room, flung herself on her knees at her husband's side. Whereupon the expression of his face changed to one of proud and fond satisfaction. He passed his arm about his wife's heaving shoulders, and bent his head to hers, and whispered his pardon and his admonition, his lips now and again surreptitiously caressing her hair.

What a sweet and lovable child it was! all of whose faults were those of impulsiveness and generosity. How right the young parson had been in his conjecture that that tractable nature could be trained to perfection. How carefully it behooved him to watch over her that the coarser influences of home might be counterbalanced! He had noticed that the eldest sister alone, of all his wife's undesirable relations, appeared to have any hold upon her. This he considered

unfortunate, Mary being a person with whom it was not always easy to deal, one whose character was singularly wanting in reverence, and who would not hesitate for a moment to set the Rector's authority at naught if the whim took her to do so. But Cecil Garnett, in the cleanness of his conscience and the righteousness of his cause, felt himself equal to a hundred Marys.

On this especial morning Mary Burne appeared at the Rectory. In pursuance of his plans with regard to her, the Rector, to the great annoyance of the sisters, persisted in remaining present at their interviews. Did they adjourn from the library, which was the room in which they commonly sat, to the little unused, uncomfortable apartment somewhat affectedly styled the morning-room, not inhabited in the morning more than at any other period of the day—never inhabited, in fact—the Rev. Cecil followed precipitately to that unloved retreat; did Mary beg of her sister to walk round the garden with her, the Rector at once reminded his wife that she had had neuralgia in the night, and that with the morning dew the grass was wet.

Then Mary, in the perfectly intelligible language of those who have lived their youth together, would telegraph to Lally to get rid of her husband, and Lally, with equal legibility, would telegraph back that that was impossible. So the two, under that grim, unsympathetic supervision, would sit and talk over the small news of the Hall and the village; would discourse on local illnesses, courtships, scandals; would repeat the latest news of Bob Burton, who was only so slowly progressing, avoiding to mention Spilling, whose slighter hurt was now nearly healed.

To-day Mary was informed of the honor which Mr. Claude proposed to confer upon the Rectory people, and was apparently quite unimpressed by the news.

"Claude and I were inseparable in our school and college days," the Rector explained. "Of late years circumstances have prevented us from seeing much of each other. It is possible now for us to revert to the early and pleasanter condition. I am delighted to welcome him to my home."

"I'm afraid he'll be so terribly dull," said the little bride, turning upon her sister a searchingly questioning gaze.

"Not with Cecil, surely," said Mary, returning the gaze with elaborate guilelessness.

"I shall take care to make it pleasant for him, you may be sure," Cecil said, with becoming confidence. "By-the-way, what became of

him after we left?" he asked, with a careful assumption of carelessness.

He had, in fact, a great curiosity on the subject. Those imagined sufferings his brother had endured for his sake had troubled him even in the first hours of his honeymoon. He had grieved to leave him to the mercies of that uncongenial set, to be disgusted with their importunities and frivolities. Claude, the prince and hero of his family, considered infallible in matters of taste and judgment, whose prejudices and preferences were always respected!

"What did you do with him, Mamie?" echoed Lal.

"He was no trouble to me," Mary said, serenely. "He quickly took himself off after you and Cecil left; and then, let me see, yes—he did return to dinner. Oh, he was very well. Papa told him about the chickens, you know—those with the five toes—"

Mary paused for a moment here to watch the Rector draw his breath sharply through shut teeth.

"And mamma gave him authentic histories of the neighboring aristocracy—"

Cecil bent his head and groaned.

"Perhaps he won't find out they aren't exactly veracious," Mary went on, smoothly. "He doesn't belong to this part of the world. Mamma was very powerful on that evening. Some very 'big ones' she told, Lal, and some quite new—invented for the occasion. But it all helped to pass the time."

Lally stopped the laugh on her lips with a quick glance at her husband's hanging head, and became extremely grave.

"And the next day, Mary?" she asked.

"Claude left by the first train," said Cecil, with a grim satisfaction in the fact.

"Did he?" Mary said, gravely considering her brother-in-law. "I really don't think he did, though, do you know. Because Mona and the little ones persuaded him to come the next afternoon to tennis, and—"

"And he came?—Claude?"

"Oh yes, he came. I remember it thoroughly now, and Mona beat him in a single set—easily. She was hugely puffed up about it at the time, but the victory wasn't much to boast of in reality. He is quite a duffer, you know, at tennis."

"Perhaps he hasn't been used to playing on quite such an atrocious court—"

"Perhaps that was it," Mary acquiesced, serenely. "And I remem-

ber that there was only one good ball—the others had been left out in the rain and wouldn't bounce. And Tona flung the only decent racket we had to offer him—he hadn't brought his own—into the fir-tree before he began the game. I dare say he was horribly bored, but I sat in-doors all the afternoon, and was not a witness of his agony."

This testimony appeared damaging to Lavarina's view; but that young lady had some astuteness and acquaintance with things evil despite her childish manner and her eighteen summers, and it is possible she read within the lines. She may have heard on other occasions Mary's account of Mary's doings—an account which may not exactly have tallied with facts known to Lally. She may have known her sister too well to believe in any such effacement of herself when a handsome and interesting person of the opposite sex was in her neighborhood.

Lally, made clear-sighted by experience, seemed to see that game of tennis with the children disputing over the strained rackets and the split balls on the lawn, upon which the end window of the drawing-room opened; and Mary, in her white dress, in which she was so splendidly handsome, pouring out the tea in the big bow. She heard her chatting, laughing with and at the tall gentleman, who, despite the blandishments and the indignation of Mona, the champion player of the family, persistently reclined upon the window-sill. Yes, all might have happened as Mary had said, but Lally knew it was possible even then that Claude Garnett should not have found it dull.

Lally obtained permission to walk part of the way home with her sister, the Rector, of course, accompanying her, and when she ran into the hall to fetch her hat she found Mary at her side.

"Are you all right, Lal, and happy?" the elder sister asked, hurriedly. "And am I never to have the chance of seeing you alone?"

"I'm awfully jolly," Lally declared, as she sprang up to knock her hat off the top peg of the stand. "Cecil's so nice—really—you'd never think—"

"Cecil's charming," said Mary, a little impatiently, stooping to pick up that gentleman's low-crowned, broad-brimmed head-gear, which his wife had set rolling down the hall. "Charming—but are we never to be free of him for a moment?"

"Never mind Cecil—he'll do very well—(he'd have been frightfully angry if he'd seen me knock his hat down). Mary, is Claude in love with you? Tell me quick. Weren't you cramming a little

just now? I daren't do it ever so *smally*. If I say 'three or four' when there's only two even—don't I catch it? He's in love, isn't he?"

"Claude Garnett?" said Mary, opening her eyes. "With me? Heaven forbid!"

"Then what on earth is he coming for?" demanded Lally, crest-fallen.

But here the patience of the Rector, who had been fidgeting in the doorway, failed him. His precious charge had been too long under the malign influence; he came forward and stopped the tête-à-tête.

CHAPTER IX

A WET WEEK

THE summer which had witnessed the marriage of the Rector of Gaythorpe to the daughter of Gaythorpe's degenerate, impoverished squire was not an ideal season by any means, but one of which we have practical experience sadly often in our otherwise fortunate and heaven-favored isle. A cold late spring had been followed by a June whose east winds, low temperature, and sodden gray sky had better suited the rigors of winter. Now and again there shone a brighter day, only serving to emphasize the gloom of those which came before and after, and ungraciously forgotten in the general survey of the season universally pronounced to be (in spite of sadly frequent testimony to the contrary) the worst in the lives of the oldest inhabitant.

Upon the hay, cut, as a matter of necessity, in the intervals of storm and hurricane, the merciless rain pelted down. The corn was turning yellow with a mellowness not of coming ripeness, but of decay. The roots had been washed from their hold, and were only a half-crop. The chestnut blossoms, lashed by the winds and beaten by the rain, the lilac, the hawthorn, and all the sweet procession of the spring had perished before perfection was reached; and now the wild yellow honeysuckle climbing the drenched hedge-rows was robbed of its fragrance; the pink and white dog-roses by the wayside were drowned in their beauty.

At Ashfields poor old Burton, the helpless and the lonely, dragging his paralyzed limbs to the nearest clover-field, looked over the gate with bitterness in his heart and despair in his eyes. Why did the Almighty send good crops that they should be ruined? he asked himself, looking day after day upon the drowned herbage lying in its shrinking swaths, black and sour with water. Why? For the same reason, he told himself, that He sent good wives and mothers that they should die and leave hearts comfortless and bleeding and torn; fortune, that it should take wings and fly; strength and vigor, that it might at a stroke be beaten down; sons, strong and constant, that they should, at hay-making time, be broken-limbed and help-

less. For that same reason; but what was it? Where was the sense, the justice, let alone the mercy of it?

The heart of the poor man was very hard and bitter as he looked on at the destruction of his crops. Things financially were past remedy with him—in any case he was a ruined man—but a good season would have enabled Bob and him to drag on for a little longer. Now the end must come quickly.

For himself, a useless lumberer of the earth, with one foot in the grave, what did it matter? Death, he had begun to think, would be welcome to him—the clods of the valley sweet. But Bob—what would Bob do?

In the long light nights of that dreary midsummer, lying awake in the huge four-poster which his wife had brought him as part of her wedding dower, and in which Bob had been born, listening to the rain upon the roof, the bitterness would all leave him. As unrestrainedly as the water coursed upon the window panes would the tears run down his cheeks, he meditating upon all the high hopes his wife and he had indulged in for their boy and of their sad and total destruction.

There had been years since Bob's birth, when living in comfort, but without extravagance, they had saved their five and six hundred a year. Were they not justified in giving Bob a good education, in thinking even the time might come when the boy should live upon his own land and be—that height of bucolic ambition—a country-gentleman? And then there had been Mary—always in the background of their thoughts of Bob there had been Mary Burne. Why should it not be?

But bad seasons and bad prices and worse luck and illness and misfortune and death had altered all this—and now—

And now there was only the rain beating on the ruined crops, and tears, tears, tears—the bread of tears to feed on and plenteousness of tears to drink!

The week in which Claude Garnett arrived as a visitor to the Rectory was wetter than ever. To quickly succeeding storms of wind and tempest they had become accustomed; now the wind fell, and it pelted without intermission.

Lally was in despair; even her husband confessed to a little depression in spite of his sense of the honor his brother was doing him. What in the world shall we ever do with Claude? was the burden of the Cecil Garnetts' thoughts,

As for Claude, he confessed that the weather was unfortunate, but philosophically reminded his entertainers that it came down just as badly at Bygrave as at Gaythorpe. Wherever he was he would have to be content to sit in-doors or to get wet.

Truth to tell, in looking back upon that week, he was not sure that he would, in anything, have had it otherwise; and on his return to Bygrave he once or twice found himself putting in a charitable word for that friendless much abused functionary the clerk of the weather. The Rector, looking at events from a different point of view, would declare afterwards that the abominable weather had been accountable for a good deal. Yet all weathers are at the service of Love—and this is doubtful.

The first occasion of Claude's reappearance was on a Sunday morning, and Mary, on coming out of church, found that Tona, with whom she had shared her umbrella during the walk thither, had scampered home with the entire article to her own cheek. Mary made no comment on the fact; umbrellas, like many other necessities of civilized life, were dispensed with often in the Burne family. She nodded her head in farewell to the group, pausing with anxious looks in the porch before stepping out into the downpour, and walked unconcernedly off, her bright face shining cheerfully through the blur and the reek of the rain. The blue serge she wore had been soaked many a time during that summer; the straw hat and ribbon were a little out of shape and off color, truth to tell, from the same cause. What was once more?

But Claude Garnett—who would have done the same, be it said, for any old gamplless woman of the congregation, but would have done it with less interest perhaps—was quickly at her side, covering her defenceless head with the shadow of his own umbrella.

The Rector, looking out over his wife's shoulder as he arranged her water-proof in the porch, observed the two tall figures, with heads held necessarily close beneath one roof, as they walked away. Their path lay in a direction opposite to that of the Rectory, but Mary's sweet, slow voice and light-hearted laugh reached Cecil as he led Lavarina through the church-yard. He was uneasily aware of a certain alertness unusual to it in his brother's gait, and his face beneath the umbrella, turned in profile to Cecil, was lit up with an answering smile.

The Rector walked with his head turned over his shoulder to watch the perplexing pair till his feet caught in the long wet grass of the road-side, when he discovered that Lally also had been pro-

gressing with her eyes in the opposite direction. He pulled her up smartly with a hand upon her shoulder and a sharp—

"My dearest child, do have the goodness to look where you're walking to, please!"

"I took such pains to make the salad, as you said he liked it with the cold lamb," Lally said, "and now he won't come."

"Not come?" cried the Rector, sharply. "Not come to lunch, do you mean? And why not, pray? Of course he will come to lunch. I shall be much surprised if he does not."

"Well, the salad's all right, if he does, you know," said Lally, who had given up making suggestions likely to prove irritating to her husband; "and so's the mint sauce. I woke in the night and remembered the mint sauce, Cecil. I knew how vexed you'd be if I forgot. And then I couldn't get to sleep again. It was so horrid—and all I thought of turned to mint sauce and cold lamb."

"I remember, dear. You awoke me, you know, to tell me so. Claude will not, of course, stay away to lunch without letting us know."

But as a matter of fact Claude did. He did worse; he stayed away for the whole afternoon, keeping Mary from afternoon service, which she was always expected to attend, her voice being so useful in the choir. He arrived home apologetic but hungry, at the hour when he expected to be supplied with dinner, to find that at the Rectory on Sundays they did not dine; to find that his brother, tired with his day's work, was considerably in the dumps.

It was so at least that Lally privately explained his mood to Claude.

"He says he's tired," said Lal; "but just preaching two sermons a day and reading out of a book can't tire one. It is when one has to sit and listen—and listen—and try to seem awake that one is so tired—oh, so dead tired! And I went to sleep in the sermon—oh, I knew quite well that I should—and Cecil was as cross, as cross, and has been scolding. I expect you're awfully hungry, for the cook is a bad one at the Hall, and Cecil says you're so wonderfully particular. I'm going to have the cold lamb in for tea. I do hope you'll like it. And how is Mary and all of them—and what have you been doing all day?"

Lally did not feel at all afraid of her husband's brother now. After all, he was like other men—he was not so *very* superior! That reserved manner of his—his cold, proud glance, his unfailing politeness in little things—which had alarmed her rather, and had seemed

to place him so at a distance, ceased to do so. "He is only flesh and blood like the rest of them," said Lally, laughing to herself; "it is Cecil who is so ridiculous about him."

And Cecil's gloom increased; for on the next day, which was set apart for what was called at the Rectory "parishing," Claude, who had set out intending apparently to accompany his brother on his rounds, suddenly pulled out his watch and asked to be informed of the shortest cut to the Hall, where he professed to have an appointment.

"An appointment?" the Rector had repeated, sad of eye and reproachful of lip; "and with whom, Claude?"

"With Mr. Burne," Claude had replied, his eyes still upon his watch. "I happened to mention that my father had taken a prize at the Royal with his Berkshires, and he wanted me to go this morning and have a look at his pigs. Won't you come along and see them, too?"

But the wise younger brother declined with a solemn shake of the head.

"Pigs!" said the Rev. Cecil to himself, as he walked along under his dripping umbrella, his wide black trousers turned up to display the thick gray knitted socks above his shoes. "Pigs indeed!"

Truly, to contemplate for an instant the fastidious Claude taking an interest in the mongrel inmates of the Hall pigsties was sufficiently ridiculous!

Nothing more was seen of the distinguished visitor at the Rectory until night. And the next day a fresh excuse was given for Claude's presence at the Hall, and the next—and after that no reason at all was asked or given.

And all that wet week, while the rain dripped from the shining foliage of the trees and weighed down the bush herbage, the Rector brooded lonely on a thought which he had to keep away from his wife, the thought of the wicked wiles the siren Mary was employing to lure his brother to shipwreck and destruction.

It was hardly possible that Claude, whose taste was so dainty, whose intellect was pronounced by his adoring family circle to be so correct, should be permanently ensnared; but it hurt Cecil's pride and wounded his vanity that the brother, whom he had represented as possessing a refinement above the average, should be even temporarily tolerant of a household which, now that his wife was removed from it, he sweepingly condemned. The feeling was unworthy

such a carefully thought-out character as his own; but, truth to tell, he hated the idea of Mary, the unhesitatingly censured, being in a position to "crow over him." He did not put it, even to himself, in those vulgar words, of course, but that was what he felt about it.

He could not very well forbid his wife to visit her own father and mother, living next door, as it were, when his own brother asked her to accompany him, but his face showed plainly that he did not approve; and Lally, who grew day by day more afraid of his disapproval and more desirous of pleasing him, would often decline Claude's invitation, would sit still as a mouse at her husband's elbow while he pulled his heavy theological books about and pored over his sermon paper. And even while the wife of his heart sat beside him and he labored, pale of face and heavy of brow, over the sermons on whose scholarly finish and literary merit he had been complimented, and which, to say truth, were a very heavy tax upon his intellect to write, he saw in his mind's eye that which it tortured him to think was going on at the Hall.

He saw Mary, forever in that dress, whatever it was, which had struck himself as her most becoming, forever at his brother's side, triumphing in the attentions which she compelled. He saw her with her white teeth gleaming, her dark eyes sparkling beneath their fringed lids with an expression both daring and seductive—an expression which Cecil told himself, with indignant shudders, might have gleamed beneath the white lids of Circe herself. He saw her with her head thrown backward upon the cushion of her chair, her round firm chin lifted, mischief and mockery and mirth in every curve and line of the face looking into the face of Claude leaning over her.

He had not been aware that that attitude and expression had been so graven on his memory; but in that pose, with just that look on her face, he had once seen the girl, and it was so he always recalled her. It was himself whom she had been mocking, bantering, laughing at on that occasion. He utterly condemned the flirting, forward, frivolous creature; if he had not been such a good Christian he might even have hated her; and yet—and yet—

He turned uneasily to the girl at his side, and put his arm about her, and looked down into her clear and guileless eyes, and drew her close to him, and thanked his God she was not as this other woman.

And Lally, for her part, sitting demurely by, was thinking to herself what good fun Mary was having! And that it was certainly nice to be married, and to have a husband who adored one, even if

he lectured and had to be obeyed ; but that there was not, after all, much excitement to be had at the Rectory, and that Mary was having the best of it—as she always had had—still !

The Hall was a shabby, neglected place, and overrun by a set of noisy unmanaged children ; but there were cosey and quiet corners known to Lally where pleasant tête-à-têtes might be carried on ; and in one such nook after another the Rector's wife pleased herself by placing her favorite sister and her handsome brother-in-law.

But, as it happened, the Cecil Garnetts were quite out of their reckoning.

Claude Garnett was not a man hastily to commit himself in anything, and he had an exaggerated, almost a morbid, terror of being made ridiculous. It was simply as a friend of the family that he established himself at the Hall. That great subject of "Berkshires," which had instituted itself between himself and the master of the house, was fertile past believing whenever the two men encountered. To Mrs. Burne he explained that he was anxious to save himself from interrupting the happiness of the newly-wedded pair at the Rectory. The tennis-lawn being under water, he played battledoor and shuttlecock with Mona in the Hall, or looked on with inward alarm while she and Tona tobogganned in tea-trays down the carpetless stairs. Tina, the smallest and the prettiest of the Burne little ones, came shyly to lean against his knee. With Mary herself it seemed he had the least to do—a circumstance which piqued that flattered beauty not a little.

He was attentive to her, polite, deferential, but he did not seem specially to seek her society ; and the idea which had flashed into her mind, as into Lally's, when she had first heard of his return to Gaythorpe, and which had made her heart beat at the hint of a glorious possibility, had retired into the background of Mary's thoughts ; the consequence of which was that, far from forcing herself on the notice of the handsome and eligible young man, she was unusually retiring during his visit, even a little shy of him, keeping herself in the shade, and thinking a great deal to herself on a matter with which he had apparently nothing to do.

For it had been at last revealed to her, past the possibility of mistaking, that she could not, and she must not, marry Bob Burton. She did not ask herself why she had become so certain on that point, about which she had had years to consider—she asked herself only how she should tell him—what would Bob do !

Now that he was so ill—for even yet there was no hope of his

leaving his bed—it was impossible! It was horrible to have him lying there under a misconception; she shrank from the thought that those little messages of condolence and sympathy she from time to time sent him would help only to confirm the mistake under which the poor fellow was laboring. Yet she dared not speak to him that cruel word, which was to shatter all those illusions in which he found his only happiness, upon his sick-bed. Therefore was she full of thought, troubled and remorseful; by no means at her brightest and her gayest.

Yet, as the sequel goes to show, she was not less attractive so; for Mary, in spite of all her faults, was a girl who showed to advantage in her own home, little to be desired as her home was. Mona quarrelled with her sometimes, and disputed her authority always; yet to her, as to Lavarina, the eldest sister was quite evidently the main-stay and the chief love. The little ones adored her, and went to “our Mary” in all their small troubles and wrongs and wickednesses. The mother stood in a certain awe of the girl, and was less foolish and idle and vulgar in her presence. And it was in Mary’s favor that the head of the house relinquished the rights and dignities of his position, grumbling, it is true, and feebly trying to resist her authority, but helplessly under her thumb, nevertheless, like the rest of them. The servants openly despised the mistress, of a class no better than their own, and preferred to take their orders from Miss Mary’s lips.

All this, not seeming to notice it—for he had a lofty way of carrying his head, and of looking upon his surroundings with half-shut eyes, as if he were utterly indifferent to them—Claude saw, and stored in his memory and thought on as he walked the sloppy roads to and from the Hall; as he sat and talked to his brother and sister-in-law through the dinner, which was such a weight upon poor Lally’s mind; as he, too, lay awake o’ nights and listened to the rain upon the roof.

And then there came a time when a rude shock was administered to him, when he awoke to an appreciation of the dangerous game he had been all unconsciously playing, when his thoughts ceased to be pleasant any more.

CHAPTER X

EXIT CLAUDE

It happened upon a day when the dinner to be provided had proved more than ordinarily perplexing that Lally fell sick of a headache, the news of this calamity being duly conveyed by Claude to the Hall.

Mary had quickly stolen away from the family circle there, and betaken herself to the side of the little sufferer at the Rectory. Claude's visits to the Burnes when Mary was absent were not wont to prolong themselves unduly, and presently he reappeared in the Rectory library, as the Cecil Garnetts were pleased to call the room in which they usually sat, and which boasted a couple of small ill-filled book-shelves on each side of the fireplace, where Mary was sitting by Lally's couch.

The mistress of the house was by this time in the brightest spirits. Claude heard her high childish voice and ringing laughter before he entered the room.

"The head's better?" he questioned her, with the slow smile which always began in his eyes, and made him, Lally thought, at once handsomer and more approachable.

"It's gone," she said, brightly. "It went when Mary came. I was only tired and moped; but Cecil said I must stay on the sofa till he came back. So here I am—a fixture! Mary's laughing at me! You wait, Mamie—wait until you're married. You'll find you've got to obey orders then, as I have. Won't she find that, Claude?"

"I think from what I have seen of Miss Burne she will find it easier to give orders than to obey them," Claude said.

Mary laughed as she shook her head. "It quite depends, I expect," she said; "it quite depends on the—other party a little, doesn't it?"

"Oh, Mary isn't a bit masterful," Lally hastened to explain, anxious always that her sister should appear in her best light before the eligible young man; "Mary only takes the lead when other people are helpless."

"Mary, at any rate, isn't such a goose as to lie awake all night because she had forgotten to order something for the next day's dinner," Mary asserted, smiling.

"But you would if you were married to Cecil, and if you knew how awfully vexed Cecil would be," Lally declared, flushing; "and if the very day before you had forgotten the hot toast for breakfast. Why, the poor fellow this wet afternoon, when his sermon is not finished or anything, has had to drive into Midborough just to buy some cutlets for dinner to-night; and—"

"Do him good," said Mary, heartlessly. "Give him an appetite for his cutlets."

"Oh, but, Mary, it really isn't himself he wants them for—he isn't a bit greedy—Cecil. It's for Claude he cares—"

"My dear Lal!" Claude protested, opening his eyes upon her, "has Cecil been making me out a glutton in the matter of cutlets? I assure you I would cheerfully say good-bye to them forever—never set eyes on a calf or a lamb or whatever animal is responsible for them again—rather than you and Cecil should—"

"Oh, please don't let out to him that I told you!" Lally cried, in sudden terror. "He—you can't think how dreadful he'd be! And I do hope you'll like the cutlets, and you must be sure to say you like them, even if you don't, please."

And Garnett had nothing to do but to vow eternal silence and everlasting devotion to cutlets, if by that means Lal would be at peace, and Miss Burne would not attribute to him gluttonous propensities.

"Isn't it odd," says Lally, with much archness, glancing from him to her sister, "that you may call me by my pet name, and have got to say 'Miss Burne' to Mary? She and I have never been accustomed to that sort of stiffness, but have always let people who are friends call us by our names—haven't we, Mamie?"

"And Miss Burne is my name," says Mary, with a fine blush and a frown at her sister, to Garnett's great relief.

He had never been on terms of great intimacy with any ladies but his sisters, and the notion of suddenly being called on to address a beautiful young woman by her Christian name would have upset him greatly. To have had such a concession made even in his own favor would have shocked rather than pleased him. His ideal woman would not certainly be one without "that sort of stiffness," nor one to accord any privilege readily. He was not of those who desire for their companion the "good comrade" order of female,

nor even the sparkling and lively order. To have been expected to stand up before a running fire of raillery would have been a terror to him. He was not anxious to be perpetually on the grin himself, nor to see the woman he admired surrounded by a company of jokesters anxious for a bout of chaff. He was rather of those who demand a picture, a vision—not ordinary laughter—and pleasure-loving feminine humanity.

Therefore it was that the shyness which troubled Mary in his presence for nearly the first time in her life, and which made her angry with herself for showing to such poor advantage in his eyes, pleased him better than any line of conduct she could have adopted.

All that afternoon, having retired to the library window and taken the yesterday's *Times* upon his knee, he gave himself up to a furtive watching of the young woman ministering to her sister upon the couch at the other end of the room; and all that he saw pleased him.

He said to himself that from the top of her richly-crowned head to the arch of her long slim foot she was a lady. He listened to her voice, and told himself that it was musical and heart-stirring; distinct in its softest whisper or its highest note. He watched her stooping to adjust the cushions beneath her sister's head, or rising to pour out the tea when it came in. He allowed her to get half across the room, bearing his cup in her hand, for the mere pleasure of seeing her walk.

She was a lady, whatever her birth. Where was a sign of gypsy blood in her, unless it was in the unusual wealth and heaviness of her coiled dark hair, in the latent fire and sparkle of her long black eyes, in the grace and freedom of every movement? A gypsy? Where was the woman born of kings and queens to compare with her?

Claude Garnett threw down his newspaper and sprang to his feet, and went forward to meet Mary and to take his cup from her hand with a light in his eyes and a look upon his face which made her heart stand still for a moment, which made her cheeks to flush and pale, her hands to tremble.

She went back to Lally's side, and talked to her quickly and not very coherently for a little, with her eyes intent upon one of Cecil's socks, which it was among Lavarina's many trials to be expected to darn.

As for Claude, he did not want to join in the foolish girlish talk; he was quite content to sit in view of the down-bent beautiful head, of the slowly moving fingers, to listen for the music of a voice, to hear the bright, contagious laughter—quite content.

Now and again Lally called some remark to him, or repeated some simple witticism Mary had made; now and again he would offer some slight contribution on his own part to the chatter that went on; whereupon Lally would raise her bright little head from the cushion to look at him, and Mary's dark face would turn to him in profile, but the eyes would not be lifted, intent on the hole in Cecil's stocking still.

And then Cecil, who was wanted by not one of the three of them, just then came in. He was wet and cold and rather cross, it appeared, and had not been able in all Midborough to procure the cutlets upon which the hearts of the young house-keepers had been fixed. He had been compelled to purchase a substitute, the name of which he whispered to Lally with evident trepidation, Lally affrightedly whispering back that it was the one thing she had not an idea how to cook. The gray woollen stocking with the half-mended hole in the heel was pushed hastily back into Lavarina's untidy little work-basket—for it must not be known to the Rector that his wife did not know how to darn—and Mary got up and put on her hat to depart, the Rector, who always felt it incumbent on him to keep his sister-in-law at arm's length, being more than usually frigid in his leave-taking.

At which demonstration Mary laughed to herself, shrugging her shoulders as she went into the hall. At the door Claude was waiting, hat in hand, asking permission to accompany her home. But the Rector, with a quick tap upon his shoulder, claimed his brother's attention, and intimated that he had business of importance to speak to him about at once if he would follow him; upon which Mary gave him her hand with a smile, and the assurance she could run home quicker through the rain alone.

Going back to the library, the brothers found that Lavarina had departed kitchenward to study her cookery-book and to take the advice of her two servants, whom she was given to consulting on every occasion, to chatting and to laughing with, as to the best method of presenting the calf's head, the result of Cecil's foraging expedition, to the consideration of the master and his guest at dinner. Claude, who privately resented his brother's interference with his plans, went back in silence to his chair in the window, and, picking up the *Times*, held it open upon his knees. His brother's news could not concern himself, he knew; he was in nowise interested.

"I've heard something extremely unpleasant to-day," Cecil said.

He came up and stood before his brother, his hands in his wide black trousers pockets, and looked Claude, whose eyes were on the columns of the newspaper, in the face. "It don't concern you, of course, but to me and my wife—most unpleasant news."

Claude lifted his eyes slowly with a question in them.

"It relates to the—person who has just left us—to my wife's sister—to Mary."

The lids lowered themselves over Claude Garnett's eyes; the handsome, clear-cut features became expressionless, mask-like.

"Go on," he said.

"She—Mary—is the talk of Midborough. I am not surprised, Claude. I think I expected it. I seem to have heard it all before. She has made assignations with men. She has been seen kissing them—kissing them!—in the public road—on the highway."

Claude's eyes opened slowly upon his brother's face.

"*Them?*" he repeated, with his air of weary indifference.

"I was certainly led to believe that the case reported to me was not a solitary one. A person—quite reliable—the groom of that unfortunate drunkard, Spilling—saw her in the embrace of a young man, a parishioner of mine—Burton—the very man who was hurt. Saw it and will swear to it. Oh, there is no attempt at secrecy; the man has talked of it openly. He saw her—in Burton's arms—being kissed by Burton."

"Indeed!" Claude said. The word dropped from him unemphatically as his ordinary utterance. He continued to gaze in silence for the space of half a minute into the other man's face, then his eyes dropped again to the newspaper lying upon his knee. He grasped its sides in both hands, and with his elbows propped upon the arms of his chair began to read.

The Rector was nettled by that exceeding calm. "Such a tale as that, going from mouth to mouth about my sister-in-law, is not a very pleasant thing to hear," he said, with excitement. "It's neither pleasant for me nor for my wife."

"Why have you repeated it to me?" Claude asked; and, receiving no answer to that question, asked another in the tone of being politely interested in anything that was of interest to his brother.

"Do you yourself believe the tale?"

Cecil gave a contemptuous snort.

"Believe it?" he repeated. "If you knew the woman as I know her, you would not ask that question, Claude. She is—there are things to be said in her favor, no doubt—but she is in bad form—

shocking form. You yourself cannot be blind to it. The admiration of man is as her daily food. Have it she will—if not from one, then from another. You haven't seen this poor fellow Burton, Claude? A clodhopper, simply that. A clownish, loutish countryman, with not an idea beyond his hay-crop; and his jacket in rags—actually in rags—kissing her in the public road! I am not surprised, Claude. A woman who could tolerate *Spilling*, a drunken reprobate, a man notorious, separated from his wife—a wife, I grant you, as bad, if that were possible, as himself—and a little time ago, remember, it was Spilling who was always at the Hall—Spilling whose attentions Miss Mary was receiving—”

Claude looked up quickly from the columns of the *Times*.

“And you heard all this from Mr. Spilling's groom?” he said.

At which a dark and angry flush overspread the pale face of the Rector, and he answered, sharply, “No;” and asked, with indignation, was he a man to seek gossip or to listen to servants' talk?

No reply being vouchsafed to that question, he went on to say that it was a Mrs. Barkaway who had told him—Mrs. Barkaway, who had thought it her duty not to allow him to remain in ignorance of a widespread report.

“Oh, it was Mrs. Barkaway!” Claude said, his voice and face alike emptied of expression.

Mrs. Barkaway was a friend and contemporary of the Garnetts' mother, a widow lady of means and position living in Midborough. On his coming into the neighborhood Cecil had received parental orders to be civil to this lady. She was, in fact, a good enough, useful woman, with her name on every local committee, and heading every Midborough charity list, and with a liberal hand ready to assist those among the poor whose own and family histories would stand a searching investigation, but she had never been exactly a favorite with the Garnett brothers. Indeed, in spite of her energy and her goodness, there was quite a large number of people with whom she was not a favorite.

“Mrs. Barkaway!” Claude said again, and after a moment's pause, and quite unemphatically, but with a subtle inflection of voice which his brother quite understood. After which he again addressed himself, as if nothing further was to be said on the subject, to the paper in his hands.

“Do you happen to take any interest in this curious will case which is going on?” he asked his brother, “The evidence to-day is amusing.”

Then Cecil gave his opinion on the will case rather curtly, and turned away. He had an uncomfortable feeling of having been snubbed, and was angry, but not ashamed. His brother, no doubt, thought that he had done an unmanly thing in repeating that report; but Cecil knew of himself that he did not love scandal, and that the reason which had prompted him to the disagreeable step he had taken justified the course. Claude had been apparently unimpressed, but Cecil knew that his brother did not always care to show what he felt, and he guessed, for all the indifference of manner, the intelligence had perhaps told in the way he had intended.

In a few minutes he prepared to leave the room. He, too, was a little anxious, truth to tell, about the fate of the calf's head, and he remembered, besides, that Lally was not feeling well, and that she must not be allowed to be worried overmuch or to stay in the hot kitchen.

Claude, left alone, turned his eyes slowly round the room to make sure of that welcome fact, dropped his newspaper, fell back in his chair, and, closing his eyes, for long lay motionless and silent.

He thought of many things—of the reason his brother had for repeating to him this unwelcome news, which for his own and his wife's sake he would naturally have preferred to keep to himself; of his own folly in putting himself in a position where such precautions were considered necessary; of how he himself had despised Cecil for the madness of his marriage; of whether he had not in his own person, by his continued presence in that place, given people the right to believe that such folly was likely to prove contagious.

He had been an ass, he told himself; he had meant nothing serious. Had he not? He hardly knew what he had meant. He had not been conscious of thinking of himself at all, only of her—of Mary. It was time he began to think.

He did not thank Cecil for the course he had taken—but Cecil had been justified. He, Claude, had been a fool, but at any rate he had been saved from posing before the world as such a fool as Cecil. Poor old Cecil! Tied up forever through his foolish baby of a wife to such a set as the Burnes; to Orlando, the father, that immortal bore, with his chickens and his pigs and his utter incapacity; to the low-born mother, with her execrable English, her tawdry cheap attire, her fatuous smile, her lying tongue; to the pretty brood of uncivilized children; to Mona, with her pertness and her self-conceit; to Mary—

To Mary, the admired of clowns and drunkards, the maker of assignations—to Mary, ready for anybody's kisses, expectant of them—

The slim, long fingers of Claude Garnett's delicately brown hand closed tightly for a moment upon their grasp of the *Times* sheet. Expectant? Even he, the future head of the house of Garnett, inheritor of its traditions of race and pride of family, and all those absurdities which he and his brother had been bred to believe in, and in which, in spite of knowing better, they somehow still believed—even he, with his 5000 untilled acres at his back and his beggarly yearly decreasing rent-roll—yes, even he might have shared in the privileges accorded to young Burton and Mr. Spilling if he had willed!

"No! With many thanks," Claude Garnett said to himself, mentally shuddering away from the picture he had called up as he lay with closed eyes so very still in his chair. Not for him the "yielding, ready Venus"—not for him by any means.

The menu of that night's dinner left much to be desired. The calf's head was found to be something to look at and to marvel at rather than to eat; the soup and salmon were "tinned" and atrocious; the jelly ran about in the dish. Claude Garnett, however, bore up against these disheartening accidents, and conducted himself with a cheerful equability under disappointment and semi-starvation which won Lally's gratitude. In the evening he played with his brother the usual game of chess, in which Cecil was, as usual, victorious. He exhibited rather more than his accustomed flow of liveliness.

But in the morning he found among his letters one which would compel him to hurry home. His father had apparently caught a cold—the dutiful son at once decided to repair to the parent's side. Cecil said not one word to delay his departure. The danger he believed to be serious. Mary was an unscrupulous woman. In flight was the only safety: let Claude go.

As for Lavarina, she was mixed in her feelings; relieved to be no longer under the harrowing necessity of providing some fresh dainty each day for table, yesterday's viands being still almost untouched, and grieved to find Mary's new and most eligible admirer slipping away from her.

"Can't you even find time to bid them good-bye at the Hall?" she asked him with veiled impatience at his want of sensibility on

the subject. "They'll all be expecting you as usual, and Mary will think it so unkind."

"I shall ask you to make my adieus to Mrs. Burne and the other ladies," he said, serenely. "I do not flatter myself that any of them will remember to think it unkind."

So he was gone.

Instead of the tall figure, looked for eagerly by more than one pair of eyes seeking distraction from the morning's lessons, which was wont to appear and to be noisily welcomed sooner or later at the school-room window, appeared the comparatively meagre form of brother-in-law Cecil, whom none of the little Burnes were ever anxious to see.

Yes; the Rev. Cecil came and leaned upon the high window-sill upon which Claude had been used to lean while he made ironical inquiries after the French irregular verbs—their irregularity was something terribly bewildering in that vicinity—and the Roman history, limited apparently to the record of the interesting facts that Ancus Martius wore mustaches, and Tullus Hostilius he was bilious.

"Claude is gone," announced Claude's brother, looking upon Mary in her big chair at the head of the table.

Was he really? Mary, with the interest of politeness alone in her voice, had asked; and had further remarked with a smile that he had apparently taken the bad weather with him, for that this was the first day for an age on which the sun had appeared.

"And I have only just finished marking out the tennis-court!" Mona cried, springing up from the piano, which she was lazily strumming, with hot indignation upon her face. "He said he'd come at twelve. He'd no business to make a promise if he meant to break it. And before people go away it's usually considered civil for them to come and say good-bye."

Upon which the instructress in the big chair, looking up from the exercise she had been correcting, remarked that there were fourteen faults in Mona's dictation, and that instead of playing tennis that morning it would be good exercise for her to sit indoors and correct them, which every one knew Mona was about as likely to do as to fly over the moon.

Soon the Rector took his arms from the window-sill and his pale face out of the sight of the little Burnes and went his way; and if he had expected to see any sign of discomfiture in Mary he was dis-

appointed. Then Mona shut the piano—a grand, but dilapidated now, and shockingly out of tune, upon which Lady Mary had played her “Songs without Words,” her soft sonatas, her “Weber’s Last Waltz” in Orlando’s childhood—and had pulled Tina’s hair; Tina, good as an angel, as usual, and laboring away at her first pot-hooks, had cried, thereby exciting the risibility of the rest, and had to be taken to Mary’s lap and to the comfort of her own inky thumb for consolation. After that the morning’s duties were proceeded with, Irene and Tona taking advantage of a slight wandering in their instructress’s attention to shy books at each other across the table, and to surreptitiously introduce a couple of kittens, ordinarily forbidden the school-room (Irene had hers rolled in her pinafore, and Tona’s was produced from her dress-pocket), to the mysteries of the ink-pot, and to the distracting amusement of pens and pencils rolled across the table.

When the hour of the day was reached at which the kittens refused to be any longer amusing, and when the little Burnes declared they would be bothered by lessons no longer, Mary went up to her own room. She went straight to the little round table in the window, upon which her writing-case stood open. Upon this there lay a letter in her own handwriting, sealed and directed, at which she looked long, standing with bent head, her hands clasped behind her, lost in thought.

The letter was addressed to Robert Burton, Esq., and had been written yesterday, when Mary had returned from the Rectory—had been written with the remembrance of a certain flush on Claude Garnett’s face, a certain light in his eye as he had sprung up to meet her carrying his teacup. It had been a flush which had made Mary’s heart bound within her breast, a light whose significance it seemed to her there was no mistaking. She had been glad—so glad! The blood had coursed wildly through her veins, her heart had sung for joy; she had rushed homeward, unconscious of the rain in her face, of the discomfort of the way, treading on air; and then she had remembered Bob—poor Bob, wounded nearly to death, believing in her, struggling with pain and sickness and danger for her sake.

Reaching home, she had hesitated no longer, but with tears and difficulty and much misgiving had written the letter which lay before her—the letter which, if it broke Bob’s heart, if it killed him, must go and go at once—in time for—

She looked at it now and recalled the hurriedly scrawled and

blotted lines which told him that she had made a mistake, that he must release her, and forgive her—

Yes; she had made a mistake indeed, she told herself, bitterly now. That sudden flush of feeling on a certain ordinarily impassive face, that light in eyes which had seemed to shine into her very soul, to question her, to claim her—these had meant—nothing!

He was a man whom she would have been so proud to win; his admiration would have set her on a pinnacle of delight, high above all other women; his love would have crowned her. To have made a conquest of that sensitive and fastidious nature, to have gained a love, never won, she was certain of it, by woman before, once won to be steadfast for ever and ever!

For once the wildly improbable had seemed possible, and it was in a tumult of happiness, of triumph, of regret, of remorse that she had written this letter; had paused in the midst of it to recall first the thrill which Claude's look had given her; to cry over Bob, his constant love, his ruined hopes. But she had been deceived. The men who had admired her, who had been at her feet, had been of a different stamp from this. It was on the hearts of such as those she made an impression; such blood she could stir, to such coarse tastes she was grateful—she with her ignorance of the world in which he moved, her vulgar surroundings, her miserable history—and Claude Garnett!

Not very likely—not possible even, when one came dispassionately to think of it. And she had made a mistake.

Nevertheless, her mind was quite made up about the other matter, and the letter—the cruel, heartless letter!—must go. Not yet though, not just yet. There was no great hurry now.

CHAPTER XI

PROMOTION FOR MARY

FOR a fortnight longer that fatal letter, which was to cause such woe to Bob Burton, lay in the writing-case in Mary's room; and often she took it out and thought, "Now, surely, I will send it"—for although the poor fellow's bones were long a-mending, and even yet there was no talk of moving him to his home, the reports of his health were favorable, his life was no longer in danger—yet could not bring herself to inflict that pain, and stayed her hand, and once more hid the letter from sight; yet never, never, for more than a moment at a time, said that the letter should not go at all.

So she waited, persuading herself that there was no hurry. And to make up for that intended cruelty to the son, she was more than ordinarily sweet and attentive to the father, sitting opposite him in Bob's chair, brightening all the dreary day with the prospect and the remembrance of her presence there, talking to him, reading to him, making entries under the old man's direction as to work and wages in the day-books filled with Bob's stiff writing; all of which matters, being duly reported by the father to the son on those occasions when Mr. Burton was driven over to the Cedars to observe with his own anxious eyes the progress the invalid was making, caused the poor young fellow's heart to swell with thankfulness and joy and pride, and his eyes, so weakened was his manhood by pain and suffering, to fill with tears.

By now the black and shrunken swaths of hay were gathered into stacks in the Ashfields yard, and the lambs, lamed by the constant wet, hobbled about the meadows on their knees, dragging their stiffened hind-legs after them. The turnips were seen to be stunted, the corn very scant and to show signs of blight. Worse than all, a check or two had been returned dishonored. This good thing alone there was in all the sad outlook of the paralyzed old man—his son was getting better, and would one day be himself again; his son's sweetheart was helpful and faithful and kind.

At the end of the fortnight Mary, from her place in the choir, looking unexpectantly down the church, noticed that the Rectory

seat was empty, wondered that Lal dared be late to take her place, hoped she was not ill, and that she would escape a lecture from her immaculate partner on her want of punctuality.

Then through the open door had come little Lal, very pretty and bright and alert-looking, with eyes instantly seeking Mary's, imparting whole volumes of joyful intelligence in a flash, while behind her, with leisurely tread and half-closed eyelids and small erectly-carried head, appeared the tall and elegant figure of Lal's brother-in-law.

The service over, Mrs. Cecil Garnett caught up her sister, who was hurrying away, and eagerly began on the subject which to her appeared of such weighty importance.

"He has come!" she whispered. "I never could make out why he went so quickly; but here he is again, safe enough! I thought he was caught. I thought he couldn't keep away, Mamie. I said so to Cecil, but he was only cross. He sent no notice, you know; he can't blame me that there's nothing to eat. 'I've just come to finish my visit,' was all he said. He'd walked all the way from Midborough Station. Whatever are you in such a hurry for this morning, Mary? I have ever so much more to tell you about, and I thought you'd stop to speak to Claude."

But Mary would not stay. What was Claude Garnett's coming or his going to her? She would not make the mistake of interesting herself in the man, his looks or his words or his actions, ever again. It was possible he might appear at the Hall later in the day; she took the precaution to be out of the way. She spent the afternoon with old Burton, read the newspaper to him, even stayed to pour out tea for him, going straight from Ashfields to evening church.

Claude, who did find his way to the Hall that afternoon, was piqued by the fact that Mary had not stayed at home upon the chance of his arrival, yet thought no worse of her for that, nor felt his burning desire to see her, to hear her voice, by any means decrease through disappointment.

That night when Lal was gone to bed, and when he himself had his candle in his hand ready for retiring, he said a word or two to his brother, of which he had been most anxious to deliver himself. He made no circumlocution, nor beat about the bush at all, but went straight to the point in a fashion sufficiently disconcerting.

"Cecil," he said, "I may as well tell you that I entirely disbelieve that report you repeated to me the day before I left—the report about Miss Burne. I, in fact, *know* it to be untrue."

"Mary has probably told you herself it is untrue?" the Rev. Cecil said, with a dragging of the lip and a sarcastic inflection of voice.

"I should not be likely to insult any woman by repeating to her such a slander. I know it by instinct, by conviction—as you should have known it. As for—Mrs. Barkaway—if you take my advice, you will cut her, Cecil. It is the only decent course for you to pursue, as you can't horsewhip an old woman. Cut her on the first opportunity."

With that the two brothers rather limply shook hands, and Claude climbed the stairs to his bedchamber, his heart curiously light within him. Now that he had openly expressed faith in Mary Burne, his last lingering doubt of her had left him. And he loved her; was not that guarantee that she was beyond suspicion? She was flawless as a statue. She was spotless as an angel!—

As for Cecil, he sat for more than an hour beyond his wonted time of retiring, telling himself some very bitter truths; that he had done more harm than good: that by repeating that tale of Mary he had simply aroused Claude's chivalrous instinct to protect what was defenceless and traduced; that, although his brother should in future sleep beneath his roof and eat at his table, he would never be forgiven by him for having spoken that which had been painful to hear; that matters in a certain most deplorable affair had gone further than he had thought.

Lessons had been brought to an abrupt conclusion on the following morning. The rain had held off for three days. It was suddenly very hot—too hot to work, the little Burnes had decided. Mrs. Burne, wandering into the school-room in all the airy freedom of a white muslin blouse of proportions all too narrow to fasten round her big brown throat or to maintain desirable relations with the belt at her waist, had declared she did not know what they were all thinking of, wasting their time in that stuffed-up school-room, laying up headaches and sallow complexions when they might all go into old Burton's pea-field and gather a peck or so of pease for dinner. She said that their father had grumbled yesterday at having his ducks without pease at dinner, and as there was not even a single row of that vegetable in the garden, she supposed he meant the Burtons' pease.

So Mary, left alone within the dreary walls of the school-room, had set some copies and looked over some French exercises, and had sighed and yawned and sighed again over a sum which had been

put away last week an unsolved mystery. Then she had looked up at the sudden darkening of the window, and there was Claude Garnett looking in upon her and gravely raising his hat. In her quiet greeting of him Mary had blushed and paled a little, her rich color being always swift to come and go, but had shown no sign of the coquetry the Rector attributed to her, nor of the triumph he would have expected her to exhibit in welcoming back this recreant knight. With calm politeness she answered his inquiries after her own health and that of her family circle; told him of the probable whereabouts of her father and mother; but declined his invitation to walk in the garden in the sunshine, pointing to the work before her as her excuse, Mona's sum. Mona was unfortunately rather clever at arithmetic, and that part of her own head which had to do with figures Mary regretted was so extremely small!

Just for to-day—this one glorious day—was Mona's sum of any consequence? he asked; and was informed that one day was very much like another at Gaythorpe, and that she knew of nothing at present which justified her in taking a holiday. But at that moment a diversion occurred; Mary's name was called excitedly in all directions, the children were seen running with empty baskets wildly tossed in the air, and presently Mr. Burne himself appeared at the school-room window, and, with a preoccupied nod of the head to Garnett, informed his-daughter that a flight of bees had been discovered by Mona in the orchard, and that she was to come along directly to help to secure them.

Whereupon Mary, catching something of the general excitement, shut her book and flung down her slate, and, springing through the open window, repaired with the rest to that corner of the Ashfields orchard where, under the blue of the morning sky, a dark shining mass was seen to be hanging from the branch of an apple-tree.

Well, it was not exactly the fashion in which Claude Garnett had looked forward to spending the morning; but temporarily imbued with that philosophy which conquers circumstances by submitting to them, he sat himself down on an apple-tree, which, bent to the ground by a long-ago gale, continued obligingly to grow in a horizontal position for the benefit of the restfully inclined, and from that safe distance looked on at operations at the other side of the orchard. He witnessed the swathing of Mr. Burne in white muslin curtains to protect his face and neck, in huge leggings to his knees to preserve his ankles, in stockings pulled over his hands to his elbows.

In this costume, making him look, as Mary said, a cross between a bride and a bandit, Garnett watched the father of the family cautiously mount the ladder, with the group of pretty children at its foot anxiously observant of his progress, with Tina at a little distance, in tears and trembling lest papa should fall. He heard Mona, swaddled in kitchen towels, no more muslin being procurable, and mounted on a broken chair, chattering directions and holding up above her head the hive into which the conglomerated bees were destined to fall. He saw Mary looking eagerly upward, the sunshine streaming into her face and burnishing the tiny waves of hair the soft breeze stirred about her dark head, while with the homely implements she held in her hands she vigorously "tinged" the bees by way of encouraging them to behave in the manner desired.

Claude Garnett was afraid of bees; so he was, quite ludicrously afraid, of spiders and toads and deformed people and ugly women. He was not at all ashamed of his cowardice, and had at once bargained that his share of the morning's work should be to look on at it. He was quite content to be regarded with contempt by Mona, valiant in her jack-towel, by Irene and Tona, to whom bee-stings were almost every-day occurrences, welcomed as pleasing distractions from the monotony of their uneventful histories. Content, so that he could watch Mary standing in the sunshine—could mark how graceful a beautiful woman can look even when engaged in the occupation of banging the lid of an unmelodious saucepan with a rusty door-key.

Suddenly the tinging ceased. Saucepan-lid and door-key were flung to the winds. There arose a shout of derision from the children; and Mary, with her hands to her head, came rushing across to Garnett on his apple-tree.

"Oh, one is in my hair! Quick—quick—before it stings me, please!" she cried to him, flushed and laughing, and wildly shaking her head.

Perhaps Garnett thought it was worth the risk of being stung himself to have the privilege of touching Mary's loosened hair. The bee took quite a long time to capture, and Claude forgot that he was afraid.

Mary was breathless and exhausted, and would not run any further risks, but sat beside Garnett on the apple-tree, and talked to him of honey and of bees, and laughed at the performances of Tim, the bull-terrier, who, having made a lazy onslaught on the savage little insects and got stung for his pains, returned to Mary's side shriek-

ing with pain and terror, and being unable to rid himself by wild gyrations from his tormentors, made frantic efforts to dig a hole in the ground, in which, presumably, to bury himself, his pains, and indignities.

At last the swarm was secured, and the whole family, headed by Mona triumphantly carrying the hive, moved off homeward.

"They are poor Mr. Burton's bees, you know," Mary said, laughing with a little ruefulness as she saw them depart. "I don't suppose he will object to our taking them. This is his orchard, but we always take his apples. We are troubled with no twinges of conscience over these depredations—the gypsy blood, I suppose."

She turned her head quickly to him with a flush of defiance as she added that last phrase, and found that he was intently watching her with a light that she had seen there once before, and misinterpreted, upon his face.

"I went away abruptly," he said, as if she had not spoken; "I don't know if you did me the honor to notice that?"

"We were, of course, sorry to hear of Mr. Garnett's illness."

"Mr. Garnett is very well. I don't wish to trouble you with my reasons for leaving without saying good-bye to you. Perhaps you can guess what it is that has brought me back?"

She guessed certainly. In an instant she was aware of the triumphant fact that it was she herself who, after all, had had the power to bring Claude Garnett—the man whom of all the world she wished to keep there—back to her side. She guessed, but she said nothing, looking into his face in a shy silence that he found neither discouraging nor awkward.

"You have not told me that I am welcome," he said, presently. "Are you pleased or sorry to see me back in Gaythorpe, or are you only indifferent?"

"Indeed," said Mary, in a rather low voice, and with her eyes falling away from his, "I am very glad to see you."

"And supposing that I left as suddenly as before, and never came back?"

A smile trembled for a moment at the corners of her lips.

"You will not do that," Mary said.

"You mean that I could not. Yet, supposing I could, should you care?"

"Hark! They are all coming back—and see—"

"Supposing I could—should you care?"

"See what a swarm of bees about the branch again!"

"You know that it is the desire to be near you which has brought me back, and you are willing that I should stay," Garnett said, summarizing their conversation with a sign of satisfaction. And then the Burne family made its unwelcome reappearance, squabbling and shouting and running after the bees which flew before them to the bough from which they had been dislodged, where they proceeded to hang themselves up in a conical-shaped mass once more.

Mona was scolding her father in a loud voice, and in no measured terms.

"Papa did not get the queen!" she cried contemptuously to Mary; "I knew quite well he had not made sure of the queen—and this is the result!"

After that there followed for Claude Garnett and Mary Burne a week which both will probably remember to their dying day as being the happiest in their lives—a week of dewy mornings and rosy evenings and radiant golden days, recalling which in after years was to produce only a confused remembrance of deliciously flushed cheeks and sunset skies, of shining eyes and golden sunrays, of smiling parted lips and dew-wet roses; a week of forgetfulness and intensest feeling—intensest selfishness!—in which all the past, with its faiths and loves and memories, was blotted out; its habits of thought, ambitions, resolutions; in which a world was filled, not with races of people fighting, struggling, dying, despairing, but only with one man and one woman dreaming ever of unspoken love.

To that the end came one evening when they two, not knowing or caring much where their footsteps led them so that they were together, wandered on through lane and meadow and field until they came to a chained-up gate. Upon that Mary rested her arms and looked before her over a wheat-field, ablaze (alas, poor Bob!) with poppies, with the light of the sunset sky full upon her face.

And nothing of that beautifying glow she felt, nor was aware of the myriad flowers crimsoning the corn—knew only that the man at her side was looking upon her face with a gaze which, sooner or later, must compel her own.

And soon, very slowly, as if almost against her will, she turned to him, and his eyes for an instant—for an age—looked into hers. Then, very gently, courteous and deferential even in that supreme moment, he softly spoke her name and drew her into his arms.

For a moment the girl hung back from him, and her breath came sobbingly.

"You know," she said—"you know about me—my mother—my birth?"

He must have known what it cost her to say that. He stopped her there, quickly, almost fiercely, as if his own pain had been equal to hers. Perhaps it had.

The brief darkness of the summer night was warm about Claude Garnett when he took his homeward way. When he reached the Rectory he found that Lally had been long in bed. Lally's husband looked up from the pages of the *Guardian* with a solemnly accusing glance.

"Each evening you are later home, Claude," he said. "Either you are more easily pleased than I thought, or the Hall people have greater powers of entertainment than I knew of."

"I am very well entertained, thank you," Claude said.

He was in no mood for conversation just then. He walked across the room and inspected the backs of the few dozen volumes which adorned the meagre book-shelves of the Rectory library. They were mostly theological works from whence the Rev. Cecil was wont to extract matter for his sermons.

Claude's eyes were a little dazzled still with the beauty of a sunset-tinted face, his nerves still tingled with the remembered touch of lips he loved. He was, spite of his quiet exterior and coldly composed tone, in a curiously excited and exalted state of feeling. He saw nothing of the sombre tomes at which he looked. At random he chose a volume. It happened to be a very new-looking and smartly bound cookery-book, and had been one of Cecil's earliest presents to his *fiancée*—a work which Lally by fits and starts only—in tears sometimes—showed diligence in perusing.

With this literary prize Claude returned to little Mrs. Garnett's padded wicker chair, and, lying well back in it, his long legs stretched before him, his elbows propped upon the arms, held the monumental work of the late Mrs. Beeton before his eyes. Cecil once or twice invited him to the consideration of those temperance drinks and aerated waters which were his own favorite beverages, but without attracting Claude's attention.

Sitting opposite his handsome brother, whose delicate chiselled features and high-bred air he so much admired, and noting the nature of the work in which he feigned absorption, bitterness swelled in the Rector's heart, and his thin lips drew into a straight line across his face denoting displeasure. Indignation was hot within him, and at last he spake with his tongue :

"We have had a fine evening," he said. The words were simple and inoffensive, but the tone was loud, ominous, and aggressive.

Claude, awakened from his ridiculous abstraction, looked up with a start.

"Oh, glorious!" he said—"glorious—glorious!" He had let the book fall from before his face, and he looked straight before him, with eyes which saw other things than the blue-green distempered walls of the library. His voice trembled and died away over the last repetition of the word, and the flicker of a smile, making his face very tender, even womanish, in expression, played for an instant upon his lip.

Cecil, watching him, felt his indignation, his sorrow, his apprehension choking him.

"Claude!" he said, sharply, severely, in the tone a loving but angry parent might use on finding his child sleeping in a dangerous and forbidden spot, "Claude, I don't think you realize what you are doing. I have resolved at last to speak out to you—may it not be too late!"

At that Claude, fully awake, sat up in his chair, the dreamy expression gone from his face, and the light of a sudden resolution in his eye.

"I have something to tell you," he said, hastily. "I have this evening offered myself to Mary Burne, and she has accepted me."

The Rector's jaw fell open, his pale cheek flushed, his deep-set blue eyes sparkled. For a few seconds he looked at his brother in speechless dismay. When he did speak, he began quite hoarsely and in a whisper:

"It is that which I have been dreading to hear—dreading!" he said. Then, after a pause, with the impressiveness of conviction and true feeling, "Claude, you have done a suicidal thing."

Claude kept his eyes upon his brother's face; his own grew cold and set.

"I call that remark an impertinence," he said. "It is an insult to my future wife and your sister-in-law."

"Nevertheless, I cannot recall it. It is a miserable marriage for you to make. It is a misfortune—a disgrace to the family."

"The family survived a similar disgrace and misfortune in your own marriage."

"The cases are not parallel. No. Do you not see that the difference is immense? Here I am a country parson—poor, obscure, with no prospects, the centre of no hopes, living at the distance of two or

three counties from the place in which my family is known. Here are you—heir to an old and honorable estate, with the duty incumbent on you of leaving an heir behind you as entirely a gentleman as you are yourself—handsome in person—with the world before you to choose from; the necessity only laid upon you to choose a wife, spotless and well born. Think of what hopes you are blighting, Claude, if not of the duty upon which you are turning your back. Think of our father and mother—of our sisters—if you will not think of yourself!”

“And did you think only of your parents, of the claims of your family upon you, when you proposed to Mary Burne’s sister?”

“I was not under your obligations, Claude—and—in other ways the cases are different.”

He paused for a minute and grew a little pale, his lips pressed together, his eyes flashing, with the flashing of cold steel:

“I don’t know if you are ignorant of the fact, Claude,” he burst out—“surely you must be ignorant—that my wife had, at least, a right to the name she bore. Mary—Mary—”

Claude had started to his feet.

“Mary will have a right to mine,” he said.

He had not unduly raised his voice—there was nothing threatening in attitude or gesture—but Cecil, who had cowered under his displeasure as a boy, and in spite of the elder’s gentleness and apparent indifference, had feared above all things to fall out with him, knew that Claude was very angry. The Rector no longer cowered nor was afraid, but he knew that there was nothing further that would profit to be said.

After the silence of a long minute, Claude crossed to the door.

“That had better be the last word between us on this subject,” he said. “We have been good friends—we shall no doubt remain so if you are wise enough never to repeat the mistake you have made to-night.”

After that he went; but the Rector sat for hours still and ground his teeth and dug his nails into the backs of his clasped hands in bitterness and helplessness and mortification.

CHAPTER XII

BOB IS CONVALESCENT

ON the morrow of that evening when the sunset had been reflected on Mary's face, and had lit for her unheeding eyes the blazing poppies in his corn-field, the heart of poor old Burton was made warm within him once more by the prospect of the return of his only son.

The doctors were against his change of quarters; he was hardly out of the hands of his nurses, and was very weak and broken still.

It was only Bob's heart which was strong, and that was set upon a sight of Mary. He knew of her attention to his father; the story of her doings had been exaggerated a little for the sake of increasing his pleasure, and the recital had set him longing madly for home—for the sight of Mary's face on his familiar hearth, for the sound of her voice and light low laughter, for the touch of her hands ministering to him.

The unfortunate Spilling, who had not drunk away all tenderness and fidelity of heart, however hopelessly he might have fuddled his brain and destroyed his reputation, had from the first conceived a liking for this somewhat morose and irresponsible farmer's son, whom chance had thrown in his way. His liking, quickened by remorse at his share in the accident which had cost Burton so dear, had changed to warm affection of late, and he did his best to keep his invalid guest beside him.

Those long weeks during which Bob's bones were so slowly a-mending were far from being unhappy weeks to Herbert Spilling. The death of relative after relative, which had given him his big fortune, had left him sadly alone in the world. Being wealthy, he had no want of acquaintances, and his house was too often filled with a set of men whose tastes accorded with those by no means refined or exalted tastes of his own. On such occasions the neighborhood was apt to be scandalized by the doings at The Cedars. Often when the rest of the party left, some broken-down cadging blackguard among them, who had perhaps lost his last guineas in Spilling's house, would stay on to be sheltered and clothed and tipped by Spilling until the dissipated young man would have perhaps a transitory fit of sobriety,

a passing paroxysm of disgust, and would by any means rid himself of the parasite. And often at The Cedars were visitors more troublesome than these, more expensive, more dangerous—far, far more difficult to be rid of—

But during these long weeks since the accident these distractions had been impossible. Spilling's own injuries had been comparatively slight, but with his ruined constitution were slow to repair. Even now, his head—his "wretched skull," he called it—was always confused, and often full of pain. In this state of forced inertia the quiet of Burton's sick-room had become grateful to him. His favorite drinks having been forbidden him, and his spirits being wofully low in consequence, and all his wrongs and faults and misfortunes haunting his mind a good deal, he had found relief in making Bob acquainted with the sins and the sorrows of his wilful misled youth, had confided to him the grievous story of his marriage and his wife's desertion, had wept unashamedly in his presence over his ruined life and evil unconquerable propensities. And being by nature a soft and kindly-natured man, who, in good hands, might have been moulded into a lovable and respectable, if not useful or brilliant, member of society, he had taken Burton to his empty unregulated heart, and had grown to look upon him almost as a necessity of his being.

He opposed Bob's desire to leave him in every possible way; offered him a home for life; tried to bribe him, with a sum which would have made the stipend of a bishop look small, to remain beneath his roof in any capacity Burton liked. Finally, having found his efforts of no avail, gave in with what grace he could command, and accompanied the convalescent in his brougham (a vehicle conspicuous with much terra-cotta, kept exclusively for his lady friends, and in which Spilling himself had never been seen before) on his return to Gaythorpe.

It happened on that drive that Bob, softened by gratitude for the affection of this poor fellow, who had put himself beyond the sympathies of decent folk, and exuberating in the joy of returning strength, and the dear delight awaiting him, felt the gates of his heart opened to reveal to his friend the precious secret from which he had not been able to bring himself to part before. Thereupon he disclosed to Spilling's wondering ears, in language eloquent only by reason of the emotion which impeded its flow, the fact that he, Bob Burton, penniless, friendless, prospectless, was the future husband of, and was loved by the fairest, the noblest, and the dearest

woman upon whom mortal eyes had fallen—Mary Burne; upon receipt of which startling intelligence, Herbert Spilling, staring with heavy bloodshot eyes into the pale face of the invalid propped in cushions before him, had been silent—silent so long that Bob regretted his burst of confidence, and marvelled within himself that a man calling himself a friend could exist and be unmoved by such tidings.

But after a time Spilling's hand had been laid upon Bob's knee, and Spilling had spoken

"Look here," he said, "I'm glad of it, Bob—for her sake and yours. You're a good fellow—I've proved that; and as for her—your Mary—Bob, I've run about a good bit, and been here and there, and into this society and that society, and have kept my eyes open—and I tell you this, and you can take my word for it, I never saw any one to touch that girl for looks and for jolliness and for 'go'—take her all round. And, look here again—to make a clean breast of it, turn for turn—I tell you this, and you can keep it to yourself or let it out to the girl, for it's as true as Heaven, and I ain't ashamed to own it—if it hadn't been for the cursed woman that's my wife, and that I can't get rid of, I'd have done my level best to have taken Mary away from you, old fellow. For there never was a girl in the world that's taken my fancy as Mary's done."

After that silence had fallen between the two men until the village of Gaythorpe was reached. Their road lay past the Hall on their way to Ashfields, and as they approached the gates of the former Herbert Spilling had an inspiration.

"Bob, let's go in and see her," he said. "She ain't over-fond of me, you may lay your life, whatever I think of her, and you've no cause to be jealous, old chap; but she'll be pleased as Punch to get a sight of you again. And she's a right to you first, the old man can wait—"

Bob, who could not resist that sudden temptation, acquiesced. And so, grown wofully pale, and trembling exceedingly, for he was weak as water still, he was whirled through the park, where the Burne herd of goats were browsing, and where the sow and her little ones roamed at their own sweet will, and where a herd of geese, rearing foolish heads, flapped indignant wings and hissed intemperately at their approach, and was pulled up before the Hall door.

No one answering their summons, and Bob being in no condition to be left standing on the step, Spilling, putting an arm within his, led him across the hall to the drawing-room, through whose half-open door strains of music issued,

In that shabby apartment, whose glories, great in Orlando's youth, were still to be traced through the defacing operations of time, ill-usage, neglect, Mona was discovered strumming on the piano, and Mona's mother, lying on one of the couches of tarnished gold carving and faded damask, slept with her cap awry, and her feet with down-at-heel slippers protruding far beyond the skirt of her dress.

Mona, whisking round upon her stool as the unexpected visitors appeared at the door, sharply called her mother's name, and gazed open-mouthed at the apparition of Bob, haggard and aged and shrunk, his clothes hanging loosely upon his now angular frame, crossing the room.

Mrs. Burne, the good-natured and foolish, got up hurriedly, if heavily, from her couch, and with many exclamations of surprise and sympathy, insisted on the young man taking her place; then rang the bell (which no one answered) for wine, and ordered off Mona (who took no notice of the command) to look up her keys and to fetch the brandy.

"Was Miss Burne at home?" Spilling asked, presently — Bob, knocked up with the exertion of walking the short distance, being faint, trembling, giddy, past speaking at the moment. "Burton and he were hoping for the pleasure of seeing Miss Burne."

"Mary? Oh, Mary was somewhere about," Mrs. Burne assured them. She'd been there in the room with her when she'd fallen asleep. "Mona, haven't ye found the keys yet, child? Go and call your sister in, and tell her there's two gentlemen to see her."

But Mona was engaged just then in watching Bob. She saw the long, broad hand which hung inert over the sofa suddenly grasp the back of it, the hollow eyes, grown so strangely large with illness, widen, the white lips move.

"She is coming," Bob said, but said it to his heart alone; no word came through his lips.

She was coming towards them through the garden, walking with lingering step across the sunshine and shadow of the lawn upon which the large end window opened; and by her side was Claude Garnett. She was laughing at some jest between them with a merriment in which he did not join, and she lifted the crimson rose she carried in her hand and with it softly stroked his cheek, coaxing him to smile at her. They saw him turn to her swiftly then, with the smile she coveted in his eyes, and catch and hold in his the hand that carried the rose; and Mary's happy low laugh came to them through the open window.

"You've heard the news about our Mary, no doubt," Mrs. Burne said, smiling all over her handsome, foolish face. "We're to marry two of our girls into the same family, it seems. But I tell Claude there's no having too much of a good thing."

Herbert Spilling moved onto his friend's sofa. "Bob, old man," he whispered, with a hand upon his shoulder, "you weren't strong enough—we oughtn't to have come. Let's go and get out of this before—"

But an unexpected strength had come to Bob. "Leave me alone," he said, roughly, and shook off the friendly hand, and sat upright with eyes fixed upon the still advancing figures.

A minute more and they had stepped into the room, and Mary, with her flushed and smiling face and softly shining happy eyes, was coming forward, when her gaze fell upon that woful form upon the couch, and the laugh died on suddenly whitened lips, and she drew back.

"My dear," Mrs. Burne said, "here's young Burton and Mr. Spilling kindly come to call, and have been asking for you, and—"

With that new strength which had come to him, Bob, forgetful of his crutch and stick, had risen to his feet, and Mary, coming forward a few steps with his name upon her lips, stopped before him with a hanging head.

"Is it true?" he said, but in a voice so low and choked that none but Mary distinguished the words. He moved one of his hands slightly in the direction of Garnett, standing a few paces off with a surprised and offended expression of face, but it fell helplessly to his side again. Mary remaining speechless before him, he turned his head from her, and looked a little wildly at Spilling. "Come along—we had best go," he said. "Come!"

But Mary lacked the wisdom or the hardness of heart to let him so depart.

"Bob," she said, tremulously, without lifting her head. "I did write to you—weeks ago—quite at first—before— But you were ill. The letter is in my room; it was never sent. I was afraid to send it because you were ill. I am to blame—you must forgive me."

It was her own words after all which condemned her in Garnett's ears; she thought nothing of that just then. For the supreme moment she thought only of Bob, against whom she had sinned, and she stood before him clothed with shame as with a garment.

"Bob and our Mary were children together," Mrs. Burne said to Spilling. Some instinct made her refrain from addressing her for-

midable-looking future son-in-law, standing straight and rigid within the window. "They have their little misunderstandin's and their tiffs like child'en still—and then they make friends again."

But Spilling did not hear this wily explanation of an obviously uncomfortable crisis. He was looking with apprehension at his friend.

"Bob," he cried, sharply, "Bob, old chap! Pull yourself together, man; lean on me."

For poor Bob's figure was swaying ominously as he stood. At Spilling's voice he shivered and tried to collect himself, moved his hands before him as if groping his way through darkness, made a step or two towards the door, stumbled, and fell unconscious in their midst.

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CHAPTER XIII

NEVER—FOREVER

EVEN through the momentary fear that she had slain the poor fellow who lay so still at her feet, the slave of her childhood and girlhood, the faithful friend and lover of her life, Mary was conscious that Claude Garnett had left the room. Without a word of pity, without a glance at the poor young fellow stricken down in his weakness, he had turned his back and sauntered through the window. As Mary knelt upon the floor, and with shaking fingers unfastened the handkerchief at Burton's throat, she *felt* the figure of her lover receding steadily into the distance, vanishing slowly without one backward look down the shrubby path—away from her, out of her life! When, with fingers as cold as his, she chafed Bob's hands or tried to pass a little liquid between his teeth, the thought forced itself upon her that Garnett was gone; the words "he will never come again" almost rose to her lips. When Spilling whispered to her to go before consciousness returned to the friend he held in his arms, she rose mechanically and silently went her way; and as she left she said to herself that since she had entered that room five minutes before she had lost all that could make life worth living.

During that scene of which she had been a witness in the drawing-room, Mona, for once in her life, had been too shocked and frightened to speak. It was with heavy and reluctant feet that she dragged herself up some time afterwards to Mary's room. She expected to find Mary in tears, for Mary was known to be fond of Bob, and Bob could never have looked like that unless he had been dying. Mona, for her part, could not understand how any one could care for Bob, with his shabby clothes and ugly boots and hands that told of hard work. She herself would not have hesitated for a moment between Bob and his ugliness and poverty and Claude with his aristocratic appearance, his haughty mien, and the prospect of what seemed to Mona's inexperience position and wealth. There was not the slightest doubt that Mary had done right—and yet, poor Bob!

"Mary," she said, in a whisper, and cautiously put her head in at Mary's door.

Mary was not crying. She was sitting upon the side of her bed, her hands lying idle upon her lap, her eyes fixed blankly before her.

Mona advanced on tiptoe. "He is gone," she said.

"Very well. I expected that. I knew it. Go away, Mona, please. Don't talk to me."

"I didn't want to come near you," declared Mona, aggrievedly; "it was Claude who sent me to say he wished to speak to you."

Mary lifted her head. "I thought you said he was gone."

"Bob's gone. He wouldn't touch the brandy, and he wouldn't be helped. He looked like a corpse walking off. Mamma says he won't live a week; she says she's seen them look like that before, and they never do. She says she dreamed last night—"

Mary put up an imploring hand. "Oh, Mona, go!" she said; "go like a good child, and let me be! My head is splitting—I can't bear it."

"Oh, just as you like. It's no pleasure to me to talk about it. I'll tell Claude, then, that you can't see him—or shall I say you won't?"

"Say I'm ill—say anything."

But before Mona had reached the door she had changed her mind.

"Where is he?" she asked; "I shall have to see him. Tell Claude to come to me in the school-room, Mona."

He found her sitting in her accustomed chair at the head of the table, upon which the morning's books were still scattered. He stopped at some distance from her, and she did not move or lift her eyes to his face.

"I have come to ask you for an explanation," he said. His manner was perfectly collected, his voice quite steady and cold. "I suppose I have the right to ask you to explain?"

He paused there, looking at her, but she gave him no answer.

"What is there between the man who was here just now and you?"

"Nothing."

"What has there been?"

She was silent, looking sullenly upon the grammar and arithmetic books upon the ink-stained table.

"After all," he went on presently, in the same carefully emotionless manner, "I do not know that I need trouble you to answer

what is only a formal question—answered already. The—situation—this afternoon sufficiently enlightened me. You were, in fact, engaged to—this person—at the time you did me the honor to become engaged to me. Is that so?”

“That is so,” Mary said doggedly, without lifting her eyes.

The unqualified admission seemed to stagger him somewhat. For a moment or so he did not speak. When he cleared his throat and began again there was something strained and unnatural in the calm of his voice.

“Very well. That being the case, very little remains to be said. I am sorry even for a couple of days to have come between you and—Mr. Burton. I, of course, withdraw my claim upon you. I am grieved to have occasioned any inconvenience to—Mr. Burton. You, for your part, probably regret that your strange oversight in not mentioning the fact of your—temporary—engagement to me should have caused—Mr. Burton—pain.”

He waited for some time, looking fixedly at her, his pale and handsome face stiffened into its set and mask-like expression. Finding that she did not speak, he turned slowly away.

“I think that is all,” he said. “Nothing remains to me now but to wish you good-bye—and to go.”

She watched him till he reached the door, and then started up and wildly and imploringly called his name.

He paused at the sound with his hand upon the lock. For half a minute, that seemed an age to her, he waited, irresolute, but without once looking in her direction. Then he opened the door and went.

Mona, lurking near, put her head in at the window. Mary was standing, her hands resting on the table, gazing at the door as one stunned.

“Is he gone?” asked Mona, in an anxious whisper, peering round the room.

Mary looked up a little wildly. “He is coming back,” she said. “Run, Mona—run and bring him at once—at once! Say that I want him—”

Mona was off like a bird, flying after the escaping young man. She called to him, but he did not halt. She came up with him and laid her hand upon his coat-sleeve.

“You are to come at once,” she panted. “I am to take you with me. Mary wants you.”

Mary’s face, as Mona had seen it just now, was white and wild;

poor Bob had fainted through sorrow of heart, the tears had even stood in Herbert Spilling's eyes, but it was not in Claude Garnett's nature to show his wounds, however hard he had been hit. The face he turned upon Mona was very cold and unsmiling, that was all.

"I am sorry that I cannot return," he said; "perhaps you will be good enough to ask your sister to excuse me."

That was all. With solemn courtesy he lifted his hat to Mona, wide-eyed and anxious, and passed on.

That evening, as Claude sat alone with his brother after dinner, Lally had appeared at the door and had called him out. Then she had opened the door of a room, to which she had led him—a room which, should the Rector's finances ever improve, was to be Lally's drawing-room. It contained at present only those odds and ends which could not find a resting-place in any other corner of the house.

Lally opened the door of this apartment. "Some one in there wants to speak to you," she said to Claude, and gave him a friendly little push towards it and ran away.

A tall screen of Japanese embroidery, which had been one of the Garnett wedding presents, stood before the door. It was not until Claude had passed round this, walking over bare boards, that he discovered Mary Burne awaiting him at the other end of the naked room. He stopped at once, looking at her with a cold stare of surprise and displeasure. She came swiftly forward. All that dulness and sullenness which had characterized her demeanor when they had met before had left her. Her face was pale and excited; her dark eyes were alight with the reckless intensity of feeling.

"I sent for you—you would not come," she began at once; "I had to follow. You can leave me afterwards, but you must listen. I did not intend to deceive you. I did not think that I was doing you any wrong. Only to him—to Bob. And he was ill, and I wanted to spare him, and I thought—no! I did not think of him, or of anything—only of you, Claude. I wrote to him to give me up, long, long before you spoke to me. After that I was so happy—I forgot everything but just you and me—everything!"

"Even the trivial fact of your engagement to another man," he reminded her with a smile that was also a sneer. He did not look at her; he walked past her and stood in the window looking out upon the bare garden, upon Lally pacing the paths, her head filled, truth to tell, with conjectures as to what the newly betrothed pair could have quarrelled about already.

"It can't be as it was with me when I was engaged and wanted so badly to get away from Cecil," she said to herself, "because Mary is so deep in love with Claude—every one can see it—and I wasn't in love with Cecil—*then*—one atom."

Mary could not see Claude's face where she stood. She did not resent his words. "I almost forgot," she said; the low, troubled voice in which she spoke resounded through the empty room. "And yet his mother was more to me than my own, and he has been always my best and most faithful friend. And I forgot! For a long time he had asked me, and I would not; and at last, I don't know why—for no reason—I said yes. Then you came, and I—But I wrote to him; I have the letter still—"

She broke off there, for he had laughed contemptuously, looking out of the window.

She held out to him a letter which she had held crumpled in her palm. "Look—if you do not believe me—here it is," she said, "the letter I wrote, Claude—I meant to send."

She crossed swiftly to him, and would have thrust the letter into his hand, but he put it away with contempt.

"What are Mr. Burton's letters to me?" he asked. "Am I one to derive pleasure from reading another man's correspondence? It were about time that the letter went to its destination. It has been strangely delayed. Or—burn it—write another. The condition of affairs is altogether altered since that was written. Write another—and send it."

The hand that held the letter fell to her side. A minute's silence followed. When she spoke again it was in a calmer, flatter, more toneless voice.

"Is everything over between us then?" she said. "Did you mean it?"

"I meant it, certainly," he said. And then he turned and looked at her, and she saw that he was not unmoved by any means, had been only putting a strong control upon himself. It failed him now in his anger; blue lights of wrath and resentment seemed to dart from his eyes, his face grew white, his lip quivered. "You have deliberately deceived me," he said, "fooled me! You acted a lie to me—every hour, every minute of your life—acted so well that I believed in you. And I had been warned against you—told a story which I denounced as a lie, and now believe to be true. I had been told of your—lovers, and I said to myself that it was your beauty which had made fools of men, but that your heart was

pure. It is not," he said, deliberately; "a woman who could act as you have done is capable of any deceit. Fool whom you like. My eyes are open—you will not fool me again."

His voice quivered and failed him there; he remained looking at her for a space as if more were to follow, then turned abruptly from her and gazed out of the window once more. Mary, at his words, had grown very white, but it seemed that love and sorrow had left her no room for anger.

"What right have you to say such things to me?" she asked, but asked in tones subdued and spiritless.

"No right," he admitted quickly; "I wish for none. I have no rights. I have renounced them all—all!"

"You never had the right to insult me," she reminded him in the same dull and listless way, as if, since it pleased him to strike at her, she had neither the strength nor the desire to defend herself. She should have been angry, but she loved him—she was too utterly miserable for anger. Slowly, haltingly, she moved across the room, yet stopped again. She had no pride where he was concerned; she could not leave him so.

"Claude," she said, "since I am so bad—such a wretch—it is a good escape for you. You are well rid of me—you should bear no malice. We probably shall not see each other again—"

"I pray God not," he said, muttering the words beneath his breath, but she heard them.

"Then will you not bid me good-bye? Will you try to forgive me? You might one day see things clearer—you might be sorry—At least say good-bye to me."

"I will not," he said, slowly, without turning round; he was staring at Lally pacing the garden-paths, and directing curious glances at the window, but he did not know that he looked at her; "I will not. I will neither forgive you, nor will I say good-bye."

And, with those words lying like lead upon her heart, she left him.

It was on the evening of the next day, the family supper being over, and the little ones sent to bed, that Mary left the room where the elder members of the family were sitting and stole out into the air. She and Claude had been used to wander together at that hour in the sweet dusk of the summer evening.

"Where's your sweetheart, Mary?" her father had roused himself to say to her as she passed him, and the girl had made no reply.

"A lovers' quarrel," Mrs. Burne had explained, with her lazy laugh. "Love's all the sweeter for fallings out, you know. But don't you be too sharp with Claude, Mary, my dear. The men have got their fancies, and we've got to humor them. That's our share of the contrac', and none such an easy one, remember."

Whereat the head of the family grunted. He was of opinion that his fancies were not, at any rate, humored, but he was too comfortable and lazy just then to say so. His remarks were always contradicted, and then he had to repeat them more emphatically, and this entailed exertion.

"What business of theirs was her lover?" Mary asked herself, bitterly, as she walked bareheaded beneath the twilight sky. Who cared but she that her heart was broken and all the world a desert? Life would go on without him, Mary told herself, trying vainly to grasp that tremendous idea, and to all the rest of them the days would be as ever. She would have to teach the children, to be patient with Mona, to hear her mother laugh and chatter, treating everything that befell with the indifference and the levity of an ignorant and selfish woman. Life would go on, and how many evenings would there be to live through without him—how many, many days with no remotest hope that he would appear!

Poor Bob, at the distance of a quarter of a mile, was spending the hours in anguish of spirit and weariness and weakness of body, in a disappointment so keen as to be an agony. All that was as nothing to Mary in the first selfishness of her sorrow. It was of Claude only she was capable of thinking—of the handsome, splendid lover of whom she had been so proud. What was he doing now? Of whom was he thinking? He had so despised her that he had not said good-bye! Her heart stood still at the thought that perhaps already he was gone—that she had looked in his face for the last time.

The idea was intolerable. She must know; she could not pass the night in ignorance of his whereabouts, the suspense would be intolerable.

Without returning to the house for her hat, unconscious even that she was bareheaded, she ran through the garden, across the park, took a short cut through some fields, ran along a quarter of a mile of road, softly opened the Rectory gate, and, crossing the garden, looked in at the only window on the ground-floor in which a light was shining.

The Rector was within, writing, with his shaded lamp at his side;

Lally, in her wicker-chair at his elbow, had fallen asleep. No Claude.

"He is gone," Mary said, drawing in her breath with a sobbing sigh. Shivering she turned away, and found him before her, barring her progress. She gave a cry, and with an irresistible impulse flung out her hands to him. He caught them in his, and drew her quickly away from the window.

"What are you doing here? At this hour? Alone?" he said.

It seemed to Mary that his voice was less cold—kinder—he did not loose her hands. While she had despaired she had been dry-eyed; with the return of hope the tears came rushing to her eyes.

"I thought perhaps you had gone away," she said. "I could not bear the suspense—I came to see."

He clasped her hands tightly, painfully; he bent his head down and looked her long and intently in the face. It seemed to Mary that her fate trembled in the balance. She dared not speak; she could hardly breathe. The shadows of evening were all about them, yet it was not so dark that he could not see Mary's eyes, and they were wet and eloquent.

Presently, drawing a long breath, he straightened himself, and pulled her arms up about his neck and held them there.

"Oh, Mary, what have you done to me?" he said, brokenly. "I am weaker than water. I have tried, but I cannot. Love! it is easier to part with life than with you."

And Mary said nothing, only sobbed against his breast.

"Mary, swear to me on your soul that you will be honest with me. Swear not to deceive me again."

She felt, by the heaving of his chest, by the grasp of his hands about her arms, how moved he was.

"Oh, dearest! I swear—I swear," she sobbed.

"There is nothing that you ought to tell me? Do not be afraid, Mary. Love, I so love you—I cannot give you up—only be honest with me. Tell me."

"There is nothing," she sobbed on. "Dear love, it was the only thing. I swear it, Claude. All else you know—all else!"

Very slowly that journey back to the Hall was performed; no short cuts were taken, and Mary did not go alone.

"Are you happy again?" he asked her, when they stopped to say farewell by the shrubbery gate.

"So happy! Almost too happy to live."

(Alas! poor Bob, tossing on his bed of pain.)

"And you?"

"I love you," he said, holding her closely within his arms; "with all my soul I love you!"

Perhaps with that speech Mary was satisfied, and did not notice that it was an evasion; for, truth to tell, Claude Garnett was by no means happy or at peace with himself. He had been cheated, deceived, fooled; because, like a maniac, he adored, and could not thrust away from him the woman who had betrayed him, was that a guarantee that he should not be so treated again?

"The gypsy blood!" he had said to himself again and again in the hours since they had parted. "The mother's bad blood?" What else could he have expected? What right had he to be surprised? The mother lied to her husband; the children deceived their parents; even poor little Lally—was she not, too, evidently given to subterfuge? Why should Mary have escaped the taint?

He had discovered, in time, that she had not. In time. If it cost him as dear as the cutting off of his own right hand, he would not take to his bosom to bear his name, to be the mother of his children, a woman who was a liar; whose faith was a thing to be lightly given, lightly broken, whose heart could be tossed from man to man!

That he had sworn to himself, and he had been a man who could rely on his own resolutions. He was of an unimpulsive nature, and of a formal mind, but he had been strong for truth.

Only his love also had been strong—stronger than he had known. He had had strength to repulse her, but not strength to fly the place which held her. And therefore he had fallen!

Weaker and weaker had grown his resolve with the hours since they parted; louder and louder her beauty, her charm, her love for him had called to him. Then at his weakest, as fate would have it, he had seen her, had looked into her face, had felt her clinging hands and seen her eyes full of tears, and—

So weak—so strong is Love!

CHAPTER XIV

AT ASHFIELDS

WITH Bob Burton slowly the days dragged on, bringing his old health and strength back to him, bringing, so gross is the condition of even heart-broken toilers in the fields, his old appetite, and the sun and weather tan upon his face.

Truly, life, with its "sweet and smart," no longer held much attraction for Bob. His existence since his boyhood had been only an experience of hardest work, whose reward had been in itself—of a dull monotony, of cheerless prospects. As the business outlook had grown blacker and blacker, and the difficulty of finding ready money had become greater, Bob had striven more desperately; working, with the will and the strength of a dozen hirelings, to fill the place of laborers paid off. He had risen in the icy darkness of the winter mornings, he had labored till the late dusk of the summer nights; denying himself a young man's simplest pleasures, wearing his coats till his shirt-sleeves had shown at the elbows, turning his back on the friendships which would have cost him time and money—all with the desperate hope that his father might be able to tide over the bad times which were ruining him; that his father's name might be respected still in the place in which he had been born, as the name of an honest man; that that hated word, "bankrupt," dreaded more than any word in the Burton vocabulary, might never be applied to him.

So, doggedly, almost sullenly, Bob had worked, and had let his work speak for him, for of his hopes and fears, his aims and ambitions, little did he say himself. And, looked at from the outside, his had been a joyless and an unattractive life.

Yet always there had been a hidden sweetness which had made the poor fellow's cup palatable; there had been a lode-star of his sordid life; there had been a rose of love, blossoming in his heart, and making a garden of the wilderness—there had been Mary!

On that bitter day when the young master, gaunt and white, with great starved-looking eyes, which might have shown, even to the non-observant Hodge who worked beside him, the sickness and the hunger of his soul, betook himself once more to the fields and took

up his old life again; it was not only that Mary was lost to him, it was that the secret spring of his whole existence was broken.

Last year when, with his strong hands he had bound the sheaves of corn, when he had headed the line of men, who with the hot sun beating on their heads, their backs bending to the scythe, had laid the pale yellow barley low—last year, at any moment she might pass! He would know the rattle of the rickety little car the Hall girls drove from that of every other wheeled vehicle for miles around, and would strain his ears amid the coarse oaths and vacant laughter of the men to catch the sound until the last. Or she, with some of the little sisters, their hands full of wild-flowers, field poppies in their hats, would stop in passing and lean upon the gate to watch the men at work.

Then Bob, with a beating heart, with great arms nerved to herculean strength, would make his mighty strokes; but he would not go to her, or seem to be aware of her presence, because he feared the rude speech of the men beside him, and was careful of the name he loved.

Yet now and again Mona would wave her handkerchief to him, or one of the little ones would call his name. Then Bob, coatless, waistcoatless, his great arms bare to the shoulder, and all his short dark hair wet upon his brow, would tramp across the field in the sunshine, and would stand—great, rough, ugly farmer's son, with the dust and the sweat of labor upon him—in Paradise while Mary willed!

That one joy of his had so dominated him, had so filled his heart and his life, that losing it he had lost all. True, he could not put the woman he loved from his heart because he had no other image wherewith to fill the aching emptiness, so he kept her enshrined there still, loving her, worshipping her as of yore, only in a dumb agony of despair instead of with the old speechless delight.

The sharpness of that pain made him careless of less poignant griefs; yet on every side was trouble. The late harvest was scant, the corn mildewed, the prices at their worst. Hardly a bullock was in the stalls, for there was no money to buy stock; in the lambing season the ewes had died by scores, the lambs were stunted and lame; creditors were pressing for money; the rent was overdue. The battle was as good as lost to poor old Burton and his son Bob. They might fling down their weapons; there was not much use in striving to hold out longer.

But Bob was of those made to spend themselves in hopeless causes; of those who don't at all know when gracefully to say "we

are beaten," and to husband their strength for a happier chance; and silently he toiled on still.

Now, when the evenings grew longer, after the day's work was done, instead of the newspaper or the book he had been wont to take up with his pipe for the sleepy hour or so between supper and bed, Bob would fetch out the account-books and the dreary, dreary pile of bills, and would pore over that dispiriting literature. Then his father, sitting silent in his chair, his helpless hands laid upon his knees, ever gazing at his son, would feel his heart ache to bursting at sight of the fagged and sickened look of Bob's face; and the tears would fill his eyes, and the odd ugly choke which signified uncontrollable emotion, and which Bob had heard for the first time by the side of his mother's death-bed, would take the old man in the throat.

On several nights, thus watching him, old Burton noticed how, having studied again and again a certain half-sheet of note-paper stamped Gaythorpe Hall, and having put it away from him and gone on again with the array of figures which, do what he would, never added up any less or looked more cheerful, Bob again and again came back to that same memorandum. He observed, too, how, when the young man put it at last on one side, he kept his finger upon it, that he might return to it the more readily. Looking up at length, Bob found fixed on him the eyes which, speech being difficult, had grown of late years so sadly eloquent.

"That two hundred would be useful to you now, my boy," the old man said, in the speech that hardly any but Bob could understand. "There's plenty down against him besides that we shall never get, and that we'll let go; but this was lent in hard cash—you'd best ask for it, my dear."

"Ask!" Bob said. "Small use in asking there. He's 'asked' by one and another all day long."

"But if he haven't money he've money's worth, I suppose," the old man went on. "If he won't pay, he can be made to pay."

Bob shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. "They tell me his very chickens are mortgaged," he said; his next litter of pigs is sold before they are born."

"'Twas your mother's money," his father went on. "I dissuaded her, but she was bent on lending of it. She'd saved it up, and set a mighty store on it, too. But he was in a muddle worse than usual, and she was in bed with the last baby; and they knew how to get round your poor mother, and sent Mary to ask for it."

Bob took up the bit of paper into his hand again.

"I remember it was Mary that came," he said, slowly.

"She was only a child, and scared to death because they had told her her father'd be sent to prison. Your mother, she sent me there and then for the money, and when I come back they was both a-crying—both of 'em."

He paused in his recital because of that choking noise in his throat which always denoted his own emotion. Since his illness had fallen upon him, the mention of Bob's mother, of whom he seemed constantly to be thinking, always affected him to weeping.

"Mother, she kissed the girl and give her the notes. "'The money was put by for Bob,' she says—'that's Bob that lends it. Yes. Them were her words—'tis Bob that lends it.'"

Bob was silent, and the old man, having choked back his tears, went on:

"And now here's to be another flare-up wedding, eh?—and the money to be found for that. Why can't it be found to pay you, my dear? Why can't it? Why shouldn't they be put to trouble as well as we? Friendship is friendship, and neighboring is neighboring, and faithfulness is faithfulness, but— Get your money, Bob—get your money."

But Bob had gone over to the fire; stirring the coal to a blaze with his foot, he stooped and laid the receipt upon it.

"I've thought about it, father," he said, as he watched the paper burn, "because there's people we owe money to, and justice is before mercy. But since 'twas mine—let them keep it. In six years they've forgotten they owe it—their memory's bad that way. Let them keep it."

Old Burton sat for long with his eyes fixed upon the ashes fluttering upon the coals, but beyond the clicking in his throat and the tears upon his cheek he made no protest. He knew very well what feeling it was which had driven his son to that Quixotic act, although of the cruel anguish tearing ceaselessly at his heart Bob gave no sign, nor dared his father question him on the subject.

"My dear," the old man said at length, "I know you don't see which way to turn; I know you can't drag on much longer. Make a clean breast of it, Bob. I know things have come to their worst."

"It don't matter for me," Bob said, hoarsely, without looking up. "I'm young; I can work. I sha'n't come to any harm. But I want to keep a roof over your head if I can."

Then the other man broached a subject he had thought on and feared to mention for long.

"My dear, have you thought of Mr. Spilling? He is a wealthy young man, with no ties. Could you not put your case before him, and borrow of him, Bob?"

"Borrow," Bob echoed, fiercely. "Borrow! I can borrow, but who's to pay? It would be asking him to give it; and we can't come to that—we aren't beggars yet."

He spoke so hotly because that grievous alternative of applying to Spilling had often been present to his mind, and because he so loathed the idea. If he could hold the land beneath their feet and the roof over their heads by the sweat of his brow, by his own wakeful nights and toilsome days, well; but "I am not an Orlando Burne," said Bob to himself, with bitter contempt. "I can starve, but I will not borrow, or beg, or steal!"

He would not, alas! even humble himself to his landlord or his creditors. "A surly, ill-conditioned beggar, poor old Burton's son!" was said of him. It was even mentioned as a matter of regret that Spilling, in breaking every other bone in the unfortunate young man's body, did not also break his neck, in which case it was thought probable that compassion for the old man would have awakened in some people's breasts.

Bob, of course, knew nothing of this; he was not one to ask for sympathy or to miss it; so he went on his surly silent way, and unconsciously made enemies of the very people he should have striven to propitiate. Yet, time going on, he saw more clearly that that one great sacrifice of his pride must be made. As a last resource, he must do what his better sense had all along suggested—he must apply to Spilling for assistance.

So that, on one fine autumn day, when more fortunate young fellows than he in his own position of life were tramping ankle-deep through the rank-smelling turnips, their guns upon their shoulders, or, the most important work of the year being over, were running up to town to go to the theatres and to see the sights, or were escaping to the nearest holiday resort to get a blow of salt air to set them up for the long dull days before them—on one fine day, then, Bob gave over work at noonday, threw off his ragged coat, and appeared at mid-day dinner, and before his father's inquiring gaze, in his best suit.

He was going over to Midborough, he said, and said no more. The father, who loved him so, had grown a little afraid of this son

of his, with his dark face, his silence, and the pain, which none dared speak of, in his deep-set blue eyes; and he asked him no question.

But when, with what appetite he could muster, Bob had finished his dinner of hot pudding and cold beef, when his horse had been brought round to the door and he was ready to start, he had looked back at the window and had caught sight of the sorrowful, distorted face, the wistful eyes that watched him, then his heart smote him at that dumb and yearning look of pain; for it was not for want of love for his father that Bob had become so taciturn, but that he so shrank from the pain of speech. For in spite of his reserve and his ungracious ways, Bob's heart was as tender and as readily touched as that of a woman. So that now, melted and remorseful, he took his feet out of the stirrups and flung himself off the saddle, and went back to the dining-room door.

"Father," he said, "make your mind easy. I'm going to Spilling—I ought to have gone before. He's as generous as the day—he'll help us. It'll be all right. Don't trouble more than you can help."

But the demon Ill-luck, who had been young Burton's familiar of late, pursued him even on this quest; for, arrived at Midborough, he found The Cedars shut up, and the erratic Mr. Spilling gone, leaving no address behind him.

One of those sudden freaks to which he was subject had seized upon the spoiled young man. He always gave way to them on the spur of the moment, having only his own wayward will to consult. He was popularly supposed in Midborough at the present time to be yachting, but Bob knew that Midborough was not always taken into Spilling's confidence. He might be back in a fortnight's time, he might stay away for six months, he might never return.

In the first moments of defeat something of relief had mingled with Bob's disappointment. When he set out for home his heart was lighter far than if he had carried Herbert Spilling's loan in his pocket; he had so hated to beg the favor he had meditated. But before he reached his destination, Trouble, which had never hovered far away from his devoted head, again folded her black wings over him. Through it all there had been Spilling, and the chance of Spilling's assistance in the background. The man had said many times that he would stand Bob's friend—had said it even with tears in his eyes. They might have been empty words, but in his heart Burton did not believe that they were. When worst came to the worst he should have to test them.

Now that that last desperate way out of their difficulties was closed to them, where should he and his father look?

Arrived at Ashfields, he found the old man trembling in a state of extreme distress. For in Bob's absence there had appeared upon the scene that agent who, since the property had changed hands, had, from an office in London, managed—or mismanaged—the estate. In the absence of the younger tenant he had walked about the yards, had counted the bullocks and the corn-stacks, had looked into the stables and the barns, had finally called upon the paralyzed old man and had departed, leaving in his shaking hands the writ which he had come down to deliver.

This, stuttering, choking, incapable of speech, the old man had held out to his son as his foot had crossed the threshold.

Bob looked at the fatal bit of blue paper with despair and rage in his eyes; then, without a word, flung it from him, turning his back hastily upon his father. He could not look at him while he killed the old man with the destruction of that which he believed was his last hope.

"Spilling was out, father," he said, in hoarse, harsh tones. "He has gone away. There is nothing else to be done. The worst—has come."

There was no intelligible answer; but the choking gasps and moans and loud clickings of the throat were eloquent enough in the son's tortured ear. He stood before the window, looking out into the garden where he had played beside his mother as a child, and which, since her death, he had kept tidy with his own hands; tending, in memory of her, the flowers which she and Mary loved; and he listened to those distressful sounds until he could bear the anguish no longer. He turned and looked at his father, sitting upright in his chair, emitting those ghastly noises, the tears rolling down his face; and it seemed to Bob as he looked that his own heart was broken.

Yet he was not of those to whom gentleness of speech comes in time of emotion; his tongue never readily expressed the feeling of his heart. He would have given his life's blood to have comforted the poor old fellow in his helpless pain, but to speak loving words of consolation was beyond him. He gazed at the spectacle before him till a sob took him in his own throat; but

"Don't, father—for God's sake! I can't bear it," was all he said, and turned on his heel and hurriedly left the room.

"B-bankrupt—b-bankrupt—b-bankrupt, Bob!" the old man broke forth in sobbing speech as the door closed behind his son.

The words reached the young man's ear, but he could not go back. Scarcely knowing where he went, he wandered out into the still moist air of the autumn afternoon, his eyes blind with tears.

In an ordinary way he would have walked over the fields to see what ploughing had been done in his absence; he would have satisfied himself that the cart-horses had been attended to in their stables; that the few bullocks in the shed had had due allowance of cake; that the pigs had not been forgotten. At this moment he could bear to look upon none of these things—they were passing from him, were even now no longer his. He turned his back upon Ashfields, and walked away as if his only desire in life was to put it from his sight.

For an hour he walked fast and hard as legs could carry him among the damp fallen leaves of the quiet road. Coming back at a slower pace, it took him an hour and a half to retrace his steps, and, reaching the vicinity of his home, he could not even then make up his mind to enter.

The evenings were short and damp and misty now in this Indian summer of the year, and after the sun had set, more than a little chill, but the twilight was precious to lovers loath to give up the evening stroll the summer had made so dear; reluctant to enter, with eyes accustomed to the tender gloom, that lighted room where their delicious claims upon each other must be overlooked in the uninteresting claims of other people upon them.

Once or twice only in the course of the last months had Bob caught sight of Mary. Even in such a little place as Gaythorpe, amid such a small community, it is possible for people, so willing it, to keep apart; seldom had her name been mentioned in his hearing—hardly at all had it passed his lips. He knew—somehow—that her lover came and went; he knew that he was in Gaythorpe now.

He had hoisted himself upon a gate by the road-side—it was that one through which Mary had run on the night when he had kissed her—full well he remembered on what gate he sat, and, sitting huddled there in the growing shadows of the evening, he let the time creep by.

Presently round the bend of the road came the tread of lagging feet, came the sound of murmuring voices, the music of a woman's low happy laughter.

The blood flew to Bob's dark face. Very easily he could have sprung from the gate and escaped among the trees, but that he should run away was a course which did not even present itself to his slow mind. It was Mary Burne and her lover who were coming so slowly towards him; and steadily Bob held his ground and let them come.

They were in sight. Bob ground his teeth and clinched the hands which held the rail of the gate to see how slowly they came, how closely the two heads were bent together.

Mary, with her arm through his, with her face all but touching his shoulder, was relating for her lover's benefit, in those slow musical tones of hers, some little incident of the uneventful day, and Garnett was smiling as he listened.

What would happen when she saw him, Bob said to himself, his heart beating with great throbs of pain. He waited in breathless expectation and suspense until the pair were within a yard or so of the gate on which he sat; then, in the strain of painful feeling, the supreme moment being come, his head turned giddy, the lovely familiar face, with the light upon it which had never been there for him, floated indistinctly before his eyes; a roar as of low thunder in his ears drowned the sound of the murmuring voice, the light laughter.

When that point of time was over, when his eyes saw clear again, and his hearing was restored to him, the lovers, seeing nothing of him, seeing only each other, had passed on.

Bob, with hands that had grown ice-cold, steadied himself an instant on the gate, and then slid to his feet. For that unconsciousness of hers Mary should not have been held responsible—yet how cruel it seemed! With an exceeding bitterness in his heart Bob stood and looked after the pair, straining aching eyes through the shadows of evening, and was not, for a minute or so, aware that the bull-terrier which had followed them, after vainly trying to gain Bob's attention, had finally seated himself at his side, and was stretching a mournful-looking head to his knees, and thumping an anxious tail with affectionate warmth upon his boots.

Bob, stooping, patted the dog's fat sides and pressed the dog's head against his knee with a strange feeling of comfort in the midst of his pain. There had come to him that almost certain moment in the life of any man who has let a dog lie upon his hearth and follow at his heels: when he gladly accepts from his brute friend a sympathy he would resent from any mere human mind.

"Hie after her, Timothy, old dog—hie after her!" Bob said, his voice a little choked.

But though the voice said, "After her!" the caressing hand said, "Stay;" and Timothy, dragging himself closer in order that he might find a seat entirely to his satisfaction upon his late master's boots, and looking beseechingly into his face, stayed.

Then there was heard the sound of returning feet. Mary had missed her dog. Bob raised himself, leaned his back against the gate, and waited again.

"Timothy! Timothy! Where are you, Timothy?" came Mary's voice, calling through the mist. And presently Garnett's sharper "Hi! Tim, Tim!" and a whistle was heard.

Bob, with a smile upon his face more sorrowful than tears, looked down at the upturned face at his knee. Timothy, with stretched throat, and eyes moist and appealing, looked up at him.

"The dog's stopping with some man against the gate," Garnett said, advancing and peering through the gloom.

But Mary, with a hand upon his arm, drew him away. She had looked in silence for a moment. Quite well she knew whose was the sturdy thick-set form against which Tim was so affectionately leaning.

"Let them be, Claude," she said, softly. "Dear, come away."

That night the messenger who had visited the poor old tenant of Ashfields on several drear occasions of late years called to give him one last warning of the coming of a Master more merciful to the broken and bankrupt in heart and purse than the one in whose behests that other agent had called that day.

In the morning the old man was found speechless and insensible upon his bed, having had a last paralytic seizure in the night. Before the dawn of another morning he was dead.

CHAPTER XV

THE COURSE OF TRUE-LOVE

TIMOTHY, the bull-terrier, returned to Mary no more; and, truth to tell, she was not altogether unrelieved by the animal's defection, the fact being that her lover had never looked on Bob Burton's favorite with approving eyes. The circumstance of Tim's having possessed a former master was not alluded to by Claude, but Mary knew that it was not forgotten.

She had learned to read that handsome face of her lover's like a book. Be his words never so gentle and courteous, she knew when bitterness was in his heart. When his brow was at its serenest she divined when trouble lurked within; however placid his demeanor, she was painfully conscious of those occasions on which his teeth were on edge, when his tenderest susceptibilities were wounded. She knew that, although his love for her grew rather than decreased, his peace of mind dwindled away; that, although his heart craved her, his head had never consented to the attachment.

She knew, besides, although he would have suffered torment rather than reveal to her his suspicions, that he did not trust her; that, against his will, and to his own painfulest self-disapproval, he was always on the watch. She knew that it was with uncomfortablest shrinking he heard the name of any man with whom the Burnes had acquaintance, that he was uneasy in the presence of any he met at Gaythorpe Hall. She noticed that once or twice he had sought confirmation of things she had said; and she guessed, with a mixture of rage and pain and humiliation, that he did not always believe her when she spoke.

For all of these things she told herself she should have hated him, that if she had possessed one iota of that immense sum of proper pride with which, privately, she had accredited herself, she should at once have sent him about his business. And yet she loved him. With all the strength and ardor of her warm and passionate heart she loved him who was in most things so absolutely the antithesis of herself, although with a love which could by no means cast out the fear of losing him, and which was therefore, according to the

word of Solomon, the "sad and splendid," a by no means perfect love.

It seemed to Mary, indeed, that in order to keep her lover she was called on to fight against overwhelming odds. In her dark moments the thought would come to her that even Claude himself was not altogether on her side, and that fear was like a sword in the girl's breast, and at such times her heart all but failed her.

Every incident of the daily harum-scarum of home-life: the father's idleness and unenlightened ignorance and evident deadness to all moral sense; the mother's vulgar good-humor, her boasting, her falsehood, her want of principle; the wildness of the little sisters, even Mona's indiscreet and chattering tongue—these things seen by Mary with her lover's eyes were magnified in despicableness. Oh, were not these against her?

And Bob Burton, making his desperate fight against bankruptcy and ruin, working away among his men in his shirt-sleeves—Bob, the broken-down, kind old neighbor's son—the man to whom she, Claude Garnett's betrothed wife, had been engaged!—was not he also working against her in her lover's fastidious mind?

And the poorer people with whom she had been on terms of affection and friendship from her childhood—Mrs. Le Grice at the little shop, who had stopped her one day as she walked with Garnett to ask why it was so long since she had dropped in to tea; the poor woman whose child, kicked to death by a colt in the meadow, Mary had carried home to her, and who ever since had insisted on kissing Miss Burne when they met, and who styled her familiarly "My darlin';" the old men who looked up from the almshouse doors to crack a joke with her as she passed with her lover—all of these seemed to Mary's awakened consciousness to be teaching the fastidious Claude she was not so "particular" as she might have been.

As for her brother-in-law—the Rev. Cecil Garnett—with his white, hard-set face, his scant speech, his disapproving glance, he was almost an acknowledged enemy. But Mary, who so feared Claude's displeasure, was by no means afraid of Cecil's.

"You look as if you were thinking unutterable things. You may as well try to deliver yourself of some of them," she had said to him soon after the engagement.

"You are right. I know of no reason why I should conceal from you that which is in my mind," he had, undaunted, replied. "I think you most unfitted to be my brother's wife. I think, since you ask me, that by marrying him you are doing him an injury, and are

not securing your own happiness. These are some of the things I think."

To which Mary had replied with flippancy that it was a mercy neither of them had been compelled to ask his permission, and that even his opinion was to them a matter of no moment; the sauciness and daring of which retort had by no means tended to raise the speaker in Cecil's favor.

Lally, too—even Lally seemed to be almost of her husband's way of thinking. The great honor for long expected had been at length accorded to Mrs. Lally. Permission to take his wife for a couple of days to the ancestral abode was extended to Cecil. The drilling the poor young wife was put through in preparation for the memorable occasion was such as to reduce her to a state of extremest nervousness and terror; and she, whose ignorance of *les convenances de la bonne compagnie* showed chiefly in a quaintness and naivete of speech and demeanor by no means unattractive, was frightened into an awkwardness and a shyness quite new to her.

The Rector saw, to his disappointment and grief, that his wife did not make a good impression on her new relatives. He did not love her the less, for he had a very faithful heart; but he said to himself that he must exercise over his Lavarina greater watchfulness and care. And the poor child's drilling and lecturing was increased sevenfold.

At Bygrave Court poor Lally had been snubbed and cowed and looked down on. She had known herself to be a failure, and had become an insignificance in her own eyes extremely discomfiting. But the experience being over, and she having obtained with many tears from her husband a promise that on no account, for a whole year at least, should she be taken to the Court again, her spirits rose. She refrained from enlarging on the agonies she had suffered, and was a little inclined to crow over Mary on the score that she had been taken up by the Garnett family, who had turned their backs, in a determined ignoring of her claims, on the elder sister.

"They never once mentioned you, Mary," Lally announced with some glee. "They did not ask a single question about you, or even allude to my people. They talk incessantly of Claude—they adore Claude. They are as plain as plain themselves, and that's what makes them so proud that their brothers are handsome."

"Their brothers?" says Mary, with an emphasis.

"Their brothers," says Mrs. Lally, lifting her head. "Cecil is every bit as good-looking as Claude—in *his way*—and he has a *much*

more beautiful nose. And they talked about a lady with an enormous fortune who was in love with Claude, and about the improvements Claude could make at Bygrave Court if he married her; and once they even said *when* he married her."

"And," asked Mary, with a flush on her face and a fire in her eye, "did not you mention me then, Lally?"

She was wounded to the quick when she found that Lally had not; the truth being that poor Mrs. Cecil had been on thorns of anxiety lest she should do or say anything wrong, and had not spoken, had hardly moved without first looking to her husband to see if he approved.

"And, Mary," Lally went on, unconsciously repeating a lesson which had been dinned into her ears in order that it might so be repeated, "Cecil says Claude can't possibly marry until his father's death unless he marries money. The Garnetts seem rich to me—they've carriages and footmen and a butler and ladies' maids, and they don't dine till I longed to be in bed—and all that. But Cecil says that for people in their position they are awfully poor. He says if any one was so mad as to insist on marrying Claude *yet* he'd have to take her to his father's house, for they could not make him an allowance. And oh, Mary, I don't think you would get on at all well there. I was all right, of course; but I really don't think you'd be, dear."

"Thank you for the compliment," said Mary, sewing away at the plain work she was doing for Lally; "much obliged."

"Oh, I don't mean that you aren't cleverer than I, and better looking, and that sort of thing; but, Mamie, you are so different from them. Cecil pointed the difference out to me; he asked me several times if I didn't see it, and I said I certainly did. Cecil says his sisters are the best-bred women in the county. They don't tell home-truths, you know, as we all do, or make game of people even behind their backs, or have any of *our* sort of fun at all. But they're awfully particular. If they aren't pleased with you they don't seem to remember you're there, you know. It makes you feel—oh, horribly small and ashamed—"

"You are small, you know," Mary said, a little sharply. "They'd find it a more difficult matter to overlook me, perhaps."

"Oh," said Mrs. Lally, lolling back in her chair, "I don't think height has anything to do with it, Mamie, and I really quite see what Cecil means."

"Yes; you've been seeing with Cecil's eyes for some time, I think,"

Mary said, deliberately. "I'm not sure that you get a very enlarged view of matters so; but if it satisfies you it doesn't signify."

After that conversation Mary asked of her lover if he had not yet spoken to his people on the subject of their engagement. She was quite conscious of the embarrassment he fondly thought concealed from her, as he avowed that of course he had done so and at once.

"I have been engaged to you for two months," Mary said, quietly, although the rich color he loved to watch for flashed into her cheeks, "and I have not yet received a word of recognition from any one belonging to you. That is a little unusual, is it not? From what Lal said I thought it possible they had not heard of me."

He was distressedly silent for a minute, and then he took her hand and kissed it.

"I suppose you love me well enough to take me without my people's approval, dearest?" he said, gently.

And Mary at once forgot her dignity, and declared with vehemence that so long as he was pleased to choose her she did not care if all the world should be against her.

Yet in her heart she knew that the fact of his making a marriage of which his friends could not approve was a very bitter pill to him. She knew him to be chivalrous enough to feel keenly every slight which was put upon her; she knew that he was greatly attached to his mother and sisters, and that any estrangement from them must be painful to him. Sometimes the knowledge of these things was more than she could bear in silence.

"You gain nothing by me," she said to him quite fiercely one day—"nothing, and you lose everything. Why don't you give me up?"

"Ah, I wonder why—I wonder why!" he had said, and had playfully stroked her cheek with his finger, smiling at her with his eyes.

But although he had smiled, he had sighed, and Mary, recalling the little incident as she lay awake that night, had said to herself that there might have been an answer more convincing, more satisfactory than that. She thought, had their places been reversed, and he so coming to her, that she could have reassured him. How she would have scouted the idea of loss, how she would have sworn to him in words he must believe that, having him, all the rest—approbation of friends, worldly advantage—were as nothing; that, being his, he being hers, they could afford to despise the rest and to let it go. Mary kindled at the words of fire she would have had upon his

lips—the lips had smiled at her, but the words had not been there. She thought of another thing, and her face burned, as it always did, at the remembrance: of how on one occasion, so lightly as it seemed to her, he had cast her off; and she had gone to him and, with tears and out-stretched hands and suppliant looks, had implored him to take her back. Small wonder that he smiled! What a mockery must seem to him that question, “Why don’t you give me up?” remembering how tenaciously she had clung to him, how she had besought him to fling himself away on her again!

There were times when she was very happy, when she felt beneath his caressing hand and approving eyes that trouble and she were far apart. But trouble even then was hovering near; for she was not sure of him, and there were even dark hours in which she told herself that she would never have the selfish courage to carry her engagement through; that the happiness of being his wife could not atone for the knowledge that he had suffered through marrying her; that it was her duty to give him up.

“You know that I am wofully poor,” he had told her soon after the engagement. “I have an allowance of two hundred a year. My father is not in a position to increase it. I cannot ask you, dearest, to marry me on two hundred a year.”

“I suppose it isn’t more than you really want for yourself?” Mary had said, a little doubtfully. Ready money was an unknown commodity in her family. They had always managed, it seemed to Mary, to do a great deal on nothing. She was quite ignorant of what might and might not be accomplished on two hundred a year.

“I manage to keep clear of debt on it,” Claude had explained. “My tastes are inexpensive. I might, perhaps, be a little more sparing, but the few pounds to be so saved would make no difference. I must try to get something to do—some post—to increase my income.”

“Will that be easy?” Mary had asked, looking with anxious pride upon the white-handed hero who was proposing to toil for her.

He had shrugged his shoulders and shaken his head. “I can’t tell,” he said; “I have never earned a sixpence in my life. There are people belonging to us who might put a good thing in my way if they were so minded, perhaps. I shall have to explain matters to them to a certain extent and—ask for help.”

“I have known the want of money all my life,” Mary said. “I have always longed to have money of my own—I never longed for it so desperately as now. I would like to have a million—to give to

you! But I cannot even make your two hundred a year four, you see. I don't suppose that we could scrape together two hundred among the lot of us. All I can bring you is—my ten fingers," she said, and smiled a little ruefully, and spread those shapely white members fan-like before his face.

"After all, they are not to be despised," she reminded him. "They are not helpless—they can work!"

He gathered the fingers into his own palms and kissed them.

"They shall not work for me," he said. "Until I can provide people to work for my dearest, I will not ask her to marry me."

That was a kind and prudent promise to make, but it appeared to Mary to pledge them both to a very long engagement, to which it certainly was not her place to object.

After that explanation of his position, which Mary saw had been painful to Garnett, not another allusion was made by him to the matter. The girl supposed that he made endeavors to obtain that post of which he had spoken; she supposed he failed. He did not say.

In his delicacy, fearing to hurt his betrothed by referring to the people who had ignored her, he said nothing of his family circle; of their own future they could only vaguely talk. Mary, although naturally clever and of a receptive mind, had seen and read so little, and Claude had a ludicrous horror of boring his hearer by what he himself had seen and read, so that their range of topics was a somewhat restricted one. And Mary, whose tongue was a glib one, and who was not wont to give her companions many dull half-hours, was astonished to find how many subjects there were on which she could not speak to her lover, a stock becoming greater as time went on.

She noticed the chill and the rigidity which came over Garnett's demeanor at each casual mention of her parents' names. Happily for her own peace of mind, she did not know that her father had tried to borrow money of her lover, and that her mother had asked him to fix a day for his marriage.

The novelty to him of the types with whom he was mixing had made association interesting at first to Claude Garnett; but, unfortunately, familiarity quickly bred in his mind not only contempt, but something dangerously like loathing for his future parents-in-law. Even the children, who had been a means to his intercourse with Mary, and whose beauty had appealed to him, through their exactions and their utter want of appreciation of his claims to their deference and respect, quickly became intolerable bores.

Truly his love for Mary must have been great. He sometimes caught himself marvelling that even for her sake he could swallow so much.

They had returned home in silence on that evening when, through the gathering mists, they had dimly discovered Timothy rubbing his mournful ugly head against his old master's knee, and Mary was distinctly relieved at Timothy's desertion of her. She was glad that he should be with Bob, and rejoiced not to have her lover reminded, by the presence of Bob Burton's dog, of the existence of Bob Burton.

In those days of Bob's calamity, in the rare moments when she was not engrossed with her lover, she thought a great deal about the Burtons.

The good old man! From her babyhood she had received nothing but kindness from that dead hand. How he and his good wife had petted and caressed her childhood, how they had wondered at her tall girlhood, growing in beauty by their side, how they had loved and admired and believed in her always! And she had failed them—and old Burton had lived to know it!

On that night when she learned that he was dead Mary lay for hours weeping on her bed, weeping for the homely family figure passed from her life forever, weeping for Bob's loneliness, for the place in their hearts from which she had fallen. And on that day when they laid the poor old farmer beside his wife in the churchyard something of the grief and remorse of that first night returned.

Looking up from the name upon the coffin-plate with eyes clouded with grief, Bob saw that Mary Burne stood beside her father at the open grave. To Mary it seemed that no recognition of her dwelt in his gaze. It wandered from her face back to the coffin upon which the first shovelful of earth was falling.

The few neighbors who had paid that last tribute of respect to the broken old man noted as they stood by his grave that his only son did not shed a tear, and as they drove home to their own safe and comfortable firesides, leaving the desolate young man to the loneliness of his, they remarked to each other that he was a morose and sullen young fellow, so "shut up" and bearish in his manner that "'twas likeliest" the old man had been felt to be only a drag upon him since he had been so helpless, and afterwards when they spoke of him they shook their heads and said, "'twas an ill-conditioned fellow who could feel a father's death to be a relief."

• But Mary knew him better. She knew how faithful and how tender was the heart beneath that stolid exterior. She never doubted of his grief. That and his loneliness and poverty and her treatment of him weighed heavily upon her.

The rustics who rejoice in any gratuitous entertainment, such as a wedding or a funeral, repair in strong force to each solemnity, and are never in any hurry to depart—have a way of lingering on the scene after the festive train has departed, or gazing down with unsated curiosity into every open grave. That Bob had been among the first to turn away from the church-yard was much talked of among them as a sign of his insensibility and heartlessness.

Mary and her father had scarcely escaped from the melancholy scene when, looking back, the former had observed the broad figure of the young man, looking so strange to her in its unfamiliar black, going off on its lonely way.

“Oh, go and speak to him, papa. Go and take his hand, even if you say nothing,” she had said imploringly to her companion.

But the exertion of having changed his clothes, and gone through an unprofitable ceremony in which he took no interest just to please his daughter, had exhausted Mr. Burne’s energy for neighborly works. He turned restive.

“Oh, hang it all!” he said; “he’s only waiting to be at home, and to get his coat off and be by himself—as I am.”

Mr. Burne quickened his pace irritably as he walked on; but Mary hung back a little and looked after Bob, walking with downbent head in the opposite direction, dragging heavy feet through the long wet grass and the decaying leaves. Almost in that moment of intensest pity and womanly desire to comfort, she would have given her own happiness and pride in another man’s love for the privilege which, a few months ago, would have been hers above all others: the privilege of running after the troubled, friendless young man, of putting her hand in his, of saying a few words, broken by sobs it might be, but straight from her heart—of leaving him, lonely still, but with healing in his breast.

A few steps she took to pursue him, but no more. What peace could her presence bring him now? He would look upon her sympathy as an intrusion, a mockery—an insult, perhaps. Through all those last weeks since his return from Midborough she had not dared to go to Ashfields. Oh, had they known that she had not dared, that she was ashamed, remorseful, or had they thought that she had forgotten—that she had not cared? Besides—but this, to

her credit let it be said, was an after-thought—would Claude approve? She did not even propose to tell him that she had attended the funeral. If he found out, she knew that he would not be pleased. He could not understand—he would not, rather—how these people, with their homely ways, their habits of life and thought so widely different from Garnett's own, had been her dearest friends. If she had followed her impulse to run after the man with whom that fearful mistake had been made—a mistake so fearful that Mary knew well its remembrance overshadowed Claude's every moment in her society—what would her lover say, then?

So Mary sent a sigh from a troubled heart after that old friend of hers, entering the silent house where the cheerless daylight had been admitted since his absence, opening the door of the silent sitting-room where a crutch and stick stood idle against the mantel-piece, and the arm-chair pulled up on the hearth opposite his own seemed eloquent of its emptiness. Mary sighed as she pictured it all, but she gave up thoughts of consolation.

CHAPTER XVI

"ALL ABOUT A RIDICULOUS DOG'S COLLAR"

ON the day succeeding his father's funeral, Bob, gazing idly from the window, descried the spare form of the Rector of the parish coming up the garden-path. Whereupon, with much promptitude, he kicked old Timothy from his feet, flung his pipe from his mouth, and endeavored to make a bolt of it. He would have succeeded but that the hall door happened to stand open, and the reverend gentleman caught him as he was hurrying past, compelling him unwillingly to return.

The Rev. Cecil Garnett was earnest and conscientious in his own interpretation of his duty, and had plenty of energy and courage at command. But, because his experience of life was so small, his knowledge of the world nothing; because in his own person he had had no acquaintance with suffering, and was entirely unimaginative, he was also unsympathetic, narrow, hard—the last person on earth to carry comfort to any mourner, although he considered it his duty to attempt to do so, and was not at all aware of the fact that he consistently failed.

He sat down in that empty chair opposite Bob, who was fidgeting irritably with the half-smoked pipe he had picked up again and held between his fingers, and he speedily introduced professional questions as to the state of Bob's father's mind at the time of his decease. From which examination he proceeded to lament the fact, about which he had freely expressed an opinion many times before, that old Burton had not been a constant attendant at church.

"As for that," said Bob, looking up with a scowling brow from the bowl of the pipe he had been attentively examining—"that was a matter which concerned my father alone. It was his business. He was at liberty to please himself, I suppose?"

The young Rector's blue eyes became very cold and severe. "Excuse me," he said; "you cannot have forgotten it is my business also. It is indeed in that direction that my business principally lies. To save the souls of men is my mission. How can I do that if they will not obey the divine commandment and come to church?"

"There's some so strict in obeying that commandment, if 'tis a commandment, that they let the others go," Bob said, with a grunt of scorn. "If things are to be all right with any of us, they're right with my father, Mr. Garnett. You can make your mind easy on the score of my father's soul. If a man's heart is as good as my father's, and his life as harmless, his soul will take care of itself, I reckon."

"Mr. Burton, are you undertaking to teach me theology this morning?" the Rector asked, with a frigid smile. He was very much astonished that a person of Bob's condition should have presumed so to express himself in his hearing. His parishioners of that class were, of course, endowed with souls, so much so no one disputed, but it was exceedingly inconvenient and reprehensible for them also to have opinions.

"Oh no," Bob answered, not at all politely. He had finished with the pipe, and he threw it from him to the table and thrust his hands, to keep them quiet, into his trousers' pockets. "I was speaking about my father. My business don't license me to meddle with other people's affairs."

"A subject so momentous as the welfare of souls is the business of all of us," the Rector replied, with spirit. "Indifference would be a sin. You understand, Mr. Burton, that if I allowed my parishioners to live in a false security, I myself should be guilty of sin—the sin of negligence. Therefore I tell you now that your satisfaction about your father's state is unfounded. There is, believe me, cause for the gravest misgiving."

"I don't believe it," Bob said, flatly. "But I have no desire to discuss the subject with you, and I wish you would leave me alone."

"I am sure, Mr. Burton, that you do not wish me to take that literally," Garnett said, his face reddening a little. "I am here to do my duty; with nothing but good-will towards you in my heart, desiring of all things to speak to you words of comfort as well as a warning, willing to be of assistance to you—"

"I've not asked for assistance," Bob said; "and as for comfort—you've an odd way of setting about that, I think."

"You cannot tell. It is not my way to say 'peace, peace!' where there is no peace. If I am unable to give you present comfort I would tell you how to obtain it. I would earnestly implore you—to come to church—not to be a Sabbath-breaker—not to follow in your father's footsteps—"

He stopped in surprise, for Bob had started to his feet.

"I asked you to leave me alone," he said. "I meant it—I wish to be left alone. I have a great deal to trouble me. Will you go?"

Poor fellow, it was his pain which made him so savage. Good-fortune would have found Bob turning the gentlest smiling face to her caress. As it was, there was no doubt about it, he was ill-conditioned, sullen—a bear.

The Rector was, as has been said, conscientious. It was not his duty to quarrel with his parishioners; his religion compelled him to give an example of long-suffering with patience. With his officiousness, his censoriousness, his infallibility, he had managed to offend pretty well every one in the parish; but where he gave offence he was scrupulous not to take it.

"It is the ignorance of the people," he said to himself; "it must not be laid to their charge."

He was not at all surprised at the boorishness of Bob Burton; he had known him to be boorish. It was his cross to be set—a man of parts and refinement, a gentleman of birth and breeding—among such people, and meekly he bowed his head. Whatever happened, he must not be offended.

When Bob got up from his chair and began to talk in a loud voice he awoke the bull-terrier, which had been lying beside him, and which, becoming aware of the presence of a visitor, growled a little, and, rising stiffly, dragged its rheumatic old legs across the hearthrug, smelled suspiciously of Cecil's gray knitted socks, and gave a short, hoarse, interrogative bark.

The Rector bent down and patted the animal's back by way of conciliating its master.

"Your dog is as disinclined for my society to-day as you, Mr. Burton," he said.

And then the inscription on the collar about the dog's neck caught his eye. He twisted it to get a better view of the words, and raised himself with his lips very tight and thin, and the two perpendicular lines deepened between his brows. He had been about to inquire with much haughtiness how the name of his wife's sister had come upon the collar of Bob Burton's dog, but for once had allowed discretion to temper zeal. He had not forgotten the disgraceful story of the kiss which had been administered on the public road.

In a minute's silence he looked into the face of the man before him, and Bob, with a scowl, looked back into his. Then—

"I will bid you good-afternoon, Mr. Burton," he said; and al-

though his glance was chilling and his tone of ice, he extended a long and lifeless hand, for conscience' sake, for Bob to touch, who, for his part, not understanding the niceties of expression to be conveyed in a hand-shake, gripped it fiercely for a moment and dropped it.

Before he did any more "parishing" that day the Rector made it his painful business to furnish himself with details of the lamentable friendship which had existed between the young man at Ashfields and the young lady at the Hall. Armed with the intelligence he had obtained from his reluctant wife, his indignation warm and his courage high, he then lost no time in addressing himself to Mary.

Was she aware that the decrepit, unwholesome-looking dog of that most loutish son of a heathenish, half-imbecile father, Robert Burton, was crawling at its master's heels with the name of Mary Burne upon its collar?

That she was fully aware of it, Mary avowed with much calmness. Timothy had been given her by Bob Burton, who had had her name engraved.

And did Mary consider it a fitting thing that she, her father's daughter—a Burne—should receive a present from such a man?

At which solemn question Mary had laughed recklessly, and had declared that her father's daughter had done worse things, and that the Burnes were by no means particular. "They were in the habit of taking what they could get, no matter who gave it," she added, as a gratuitous piece of information.

Then did Claude know of this circumstance of the collar? the Rev. Cecil asked, and was with much flippancy advised to seek an answer from Claude himself.

Thereupon Lally, who was present, became frightened at so much daring, and grew pink in the cheeks. "Cecil is asking you in kindness, Mary," she said; "Cecil thinks Claude might object; that it would be safer for you to—"

"Claude and I prefer to manage our own affairs," Mary had ungratefully asserted. "We would prefer Cecil not to trouble about what concerns ourselves alone."

"You are mistaken," Cecil said, his thin nostrils dilating, cold fires flashing from his blue eyes. "What concerns you and Claude concerns me. You are my wife's sister—from that fact there is no escaping—and the knowledge that my wife's sister has deigned to take a present from this man—"

"A present of a dog!" cried Mary, interrupting. "Why, what is there that we have not taken from him? Of everything that he has he has given us. Lally can tell you the same if she will speak out. Ever since we can remember have we not taken from Bob and Bob's people anything they would give us? Speak out, Lally—have we not? All our lives we have preyed upon them; what they did not think to offer us we took—"

"You are carried away by excitement," the Rector said, looking with disfavor upon her flushing cheeks. "You cannot be aware of what you are saying."

But Mary was too much roused to heed him. All the wrongs of the Burtons must come out now.

"They have lent us money," she went on, not heeding the interruption. "Yes, I remember very well—you can ask if it has been paid, if you like; on the other hand, as you know the answer beforehand, you can spare yourself the trouble. We have taken from them food for ourselves, our horses, the pigs, the chickens. Perhaps there was once an idea we bought it, but payment has never been spoken of. We have used their horses, borrowed their goods, broken them, spoiled them, used them up, borrowed again. We—there is nothing in which we have spared them," Mary said, with a sudden trembling of the voice, remembering that last cruelest wrong which she alone had wrought.

"It is disgraceful! It is shameless!" Cecil said, with intensest bitterness. He did very keenly feel the shame. "You—you ought not to be able to bring yourself to speak of such things."

Mary gave a scornful shrug of the shoulder.

"Oh, if one isn't ashamed to do the things!" she said.

"If these things be true, the man, in some way, must be paid," Cecil said, sternly. "Do you know that to clear himself from debt he will have to part with everything he possesses down to his last stick? And you talk calmly of owing money to a man in that position. He must be paid."

"How?" demanded Mary, flashing upon him. "I have not a sixpence in the world, or the worth of a sixpence—or ever shall have. My father—perhaps you know how useless it is to look to him for money! The debtors are "your wife's people," you know. And Lally, I remember, used to ride their horses, eat their good things, and steal the apples out of their orchard. Perhaps Lally's husband will pay him?"

"We have not yet succeeded in living within our income," the

Rector said, his brow darkening. "Lally is not a very good house-keeper yet. I have had to go to my father to pay my own debts. I do not at present feel justified in undertaking your father's."

"You can pay Mr. Burton by insult, then," Mary said, bitterly. "You can call him boorish and sullen, and his father—who did not preach his Christianity but who lived it, let me tell you; a far better thing—a heathen. You can order him to take the name of one of 'your wife's people' off his dog's collar."

"I shall certainly see that he is requested to take it off," Cecil said, with much haughty determination.

"Bob would do anything for Mamie—he always would," Lally put in, not very judiciously. "If you just said Mamie wished it, it would be enough. Couldn't you ask Bob yourself, Mary?"

"I ask him? I wouldn't speak a word to him now that would pain him to save my soul—to save the souls of all of you!" Mary declared, with the vehemence which Cecil thought so reprehensible, and which sometimes so startled Claude.

"Remember, Lally," she said to her sister, when the Rector had turned his back in wrath and left them alone—"your husband is not very pleasant to me, but perhaps he doesn't know how to be pleasant, and it doesn't matter—only remember, if he does anything to insult or annoy Bob Burton, or if even he is the means of Claude doing it, I won't come into his house again, even for your sake."

And this when winter was at hand, and Lally could not get out very much, but looked forward so eagerly to the couple of hours Mary daily spent at the Rectory, chatting over the small events of the day, the unexciting prospects for the morrow, the gossip of the village or of Midborough, sewing away all the time at the plain work, over which Lally could only prick her fingers and cry.

Lally was looking forward with some apprehension to the long winter before her. No skating for her this year, no long walks on the frosty roads, when, however little cause the young Burnes had to be joyful, their spirits always rose, their laughter and bright voices sounding exhilarating in their own ears; when, the walk being over, they would rush in, rosy and hungry and healthy, to the untidy, unpunctual, but by no means unenjoyable meals; to the long evening over the school-room fire, with chestnuts roasting on the bars, if one of them had been lucky enough to get hold of a few pence with which to purchase the dainty; when they would tease each other and quarrel with each other and love each other and be happy!

It all seemed very pleasant to look back upon to poor Lally in

only moderate health, with fluctuating spirits and a growing love and fear of the husband who was so kind, but so very uncompanionable—uncompanionable in the way, that is, that Lally understood the word: a companionable person being some one to laugh with, to chaff, to tell secrets to, some one with whom one need not be so particular over one's statements and sentiments. Cecil was so careful of her, and it was kind of him to want to improve her, because she quite saw, now that he pointed it out to her so often, how defective her bringing-up had been—how wrong, if amusing, much that had gone on in her life—only it was all so wearying, always! The books he marked for her to read weren't so interesting as the penny fiction Lally had been used to borrow from the kitchen, and which formerly had been her only literature. Cecil's books made her head ache; and she was obliged to try to understand them, because he made a point of talking to her about them afterwards.

On those evenings when he read to her the case was not much better, because Lally was not allowed to fidget in her chair; and the physical impossibility of sitting still for more than a minute at a time in that creaky wicker-chair of hers brought the poor child into frequent trouble. How could she listen to the calm sonorous tones of the voice which her husband was secretly proud of, and which Lally really thought the most beautiful and distinguished in the world, when her whole mind was concentrated on the effort to repress the spasmodic jerks which seized her in every limb? The strain upon her would turn her faint in the finish, and Cecil, looking up to comment on something he had read, would see a pallid little face and filmy eyes, and tears wet upon the cheek.

On principle Cecil would not let her see how moved he was at that sight, because of a theory he had that scolding was good for fainting women; but would upbraid her sharply for her foolishness and weakness, even while he ministered to her with tender hands; so that Lally, when possible, hid her faint feelings, as she did many another feminine peccadillo, from her husband's knowledge.

Certainly, then, Lally could less than ever do without Mary now. And she did not at all understand that fuss about Bob and Bob's fine feelings. Bob was quite a different person from Cecil, who had to be thought about and considered in everything. It was absurd of Mary suddenly to want to make the young fellow into a personage at all. They had known him all their lives, and he never *had* signified; Lally, at any rate, was not going to begin to stand on ceremony with Bob.

Therefore, after being lectured by her husband on the subject until she was wearied, after sitting through other and livelier skirmishes on the same theme between him and Mary, Lally conceived and forthwith carried out the bold and brilliant notion of putting matters right herself.

"All about a ridiculous dog's collar," she said to herself, with fine contempt; she, herself, having such infinitely greater worries always on hand.

So she scrawled off a note to Mr. Robert Burton, which would very soon put everything straight.

CHAPTER XVII

TIMOTHY

THE letter, which took so few minutes to indite—for Lally, if not a brilliant correspondent, was a very rapid one, never pausing for a suitable expression, nor to glance over the epistle when written—took long to decipher; for Mrs. Cecil Garnett's was a very unformed sort of childish caligraphy, rendered more illegible in this instance through being in pencil—a lazy method much in favor with Lally, although sternly forbidden by her husband. What with the alternate blackleadiness and scratchiness of the writing, and the irregularities in the letters, induced by the pattern of the book-cover on which the lines were written, Bob had some ado to make it out.

“DEAR BOB”—(the letter ran)—“I want to tell you how sorry I am that your father is dead. I expect you miss him very much, as he was always there, but of course he is out of his pain, and that must be a consolation. I should have come to tell you this, but Cecil always does the parishing himself. I can't tell you when Mary is going to be married. It is a good chance for her to marry into my husband's family. I tease her about being so much in love. I never thought she would be, did you? She is just gone away; she sends her kind regards, and I will be much obliged if you will send her old Tim's collar, that has her name. She hopes it won't be a trouble, as she does not think Claude would like her name on people's dogs' collars.

“With kind love, and hoping you will soon have got over your father.
Yours truly,

LALLY GARNETT.”

Having deciphered this well-thought-out and elegantly-expressed epistle, Bob laid it beside his plate, pushed back his chair from the untasted breakfast, and lovingly and thoughtfully contemplated the form of old Timothy asleep on the hearth in the blaze of the cheerful wood-fire.

Timothy was dreaming of better days: of days before his legs were so rheumatic, his eyes so blear, his bark so hoarse and toneless

—days when his master, if not more kind, was livelier, at least, and taking a wholesome interest in those sports appropriate to dogs and men. In his dreams on the warm hearth he was following at his master's heels through the turnips; he was running ahead of Bob's mare galloping along the broad green road-side into Midborough; he was having a good time with Bob and the ferrets at one of the old corn-stacks. Presently he was pursuing a little brown rabbit along a narrow sandy lane, and each time he caught sight of the bit of tell-tale white at bunny's tail he gave a short, sharp bark which, in spite of its hoarseness, was full of joy; and when presently, the rabbit and the sandy lane having melted away from him, he was put on a good thing in the shape of a rat-hole by the pond in the park-meadow, he sobbed and whined and wept in his sleep with much eagerness and pleasure.

With his brow knit, and biting slowly at his finger-nails, Bob watched these agitated and eventful slumbers for a long time in silence. Presently he roused himself from the contemplation, and again took up Lavarina's letter. He could read it easier now, and there were parts of it he—a sentence here and there—read many times. Then he crushed it into a ball in his hand and flung it at the fire.

The paper ball fell short of its aim, dropping upon the nose of the sleeping Timothy, who, thus abruptly recalled to the flatness of present-day existence, regarded Bob with a dull interrogation, raised himself stiffly upon his fore-legs, yawned in a thorough and leisnrely fashion, shook himself with noisy vehemence, then dragged himself across the intervening space, and sat down again in his favorite spot upon Bob's broad boots.

Then Bob, leaning over the dog, caught the upstretched head in his hands, and looked long into the pathetic dim eyes.

“‘It is a good chance for her’ . . . and . . . ‘she is so much in love,’” Bob quoted from Lal's letter. He did not quote aloud, because there was no need of speech between those two old friends, and because he would have scorned a man who had been so sentimental an ass as to put such things into words. “. . . ‘So much in love!’ And I am quite alone—in all the world have only you—only you in all the world, Tim.”

And Tim understood quite well, for he sighed deeply and thumped with his tail the shabby carpet, whose green fern leaves Bob could remember so bright, whose baskets of flowers so gay.

Then, holding the black muzzle in one hand, Bob slipped the

fingers of the other through the collar and twisted it until he could read the inscription he had been so proud to compose: "Mary Burne from R. B."

"She wants you to give this up, old dog," he went on, presently, in the dumb language which Tim, reading his face intently, seemed to understand. "But you won't, Tim? We won't while we live, old friend. I saw that white-livered parson staring at her name—why didn't you fly at his lean shanks, Tim—why didn't you?" Tim gave two short regretful barks, and whined a little in sorrow for an opportunity lost. "Time was when you'd have done it as soon as looked at him, Tim—why didn't you, dear?"

"For no canting parson, for no long d—— Johnny Good-boy of a lover, will we give up what's ours by right, Timothy—not if we must die for it, old boy—do you hear? not if we must die!"

"And it's about time; you've got nothing to regret, my faithfulest friend. You're in luck, the best of everything being over, that life will be over, too. You won't have to say good-bye to the old place, Tim, and turn your back and go out alone into a world of which you know nothing, and which yet you hate, to carry on a life you loathe.

"Tim, do you remember that corner in the orchard, under the orange-pippin, just beyond the garden hedge, where she and mother once took their sewing all on a summer day? You sat between my knees, Tim, and her sewing lay on the grass, and she threw the little windfalls for you to snap at with your old black jaws. I wonder why that hour out of a day—like thousands of others—seems to have been the very happiest hour of my life, Tim? I didn't think of it while 'twas there, nor yet till 'twas long past. But now 'tis always coming back to me, and standing out distinct among a confusion of happy hours, of peaceful days. I'm always thinking of it, and the blue speedwells all about, and a couple of dragon-flies that darted about her dress, and mother's voice talking about the work in her hand.

"You've forgot the day, Tim? But you remember the corner in the orchard, because you and I have sat there many a time since. And there you shall lie, my only friend, and there you shall dream of your rat-hunts and your rabbitings and the good times we've had together. It'll all be there in that slow old brain of yours that used to be so quick—all there still when you've gone to sleep and don't wake any more.

"And whatever else, in that sound sleep of yours, you forget, Tim,

this at least you will remember always and always, my best and truest—that you were faithful, and that I loved you.”

He bent his head lower and lower till his lips touched the wrinkled white skin between the old dog's eyes, touched the name upon the collar. Even then he did not raise his head, and Timothy, shooting out a long pink tongue, licked the salt tears from his master's cheeks.

That afternoon, an hour before the dusk came on, Tina and Tona, who had a great fancy at this period for frequenting the Ashfields orchards where some of the winter apples still hung, came flying to Mary, sitting with a book over the fire, with looks of grief and consternation upon their pretty faces.

What did she think—oh, what could Mary ever—ever think? Bob Burton's Timothy was dead—Bob's dear old Timothy that he loved so! They knew it was dead, Tina explained, amid sobs and weeping (a saving grace among the unsatisfactory little Burnes was their love of animals; they had a special gift for taming them and attaching them to their persons), for it lay quite stiff in a corner of the orchard, and when they spoke to it, it didn't bark.

As for Mary, she was greatly moved by that intelligence. “Poor Bob!” she said once or twice, with much thoughtfulness. “Poor Bob!” Then she flung her book upon the table, and, taking the children's hands, went out with them, bareheaded, as she was, not heeding the damp and chill of the atmosphere. And when they had gained the orchard and found the body of the dog lying deep in the wet grass, Mary went down on her knees and mourned over Timothy, and tenderly smoothed and patted the stiff limbs.

So that Bob Burton, returning to the spot with the board which he had interrupted the burial to fetch, saw with astonished eyes the form of Mary Burne bending over the dead Timothy; he heard the voice of Mary Burne murmuring in deaf ears that “he was a good dog—a faithful dog, and that she was sorry.”

With wet eyes she looked up at the young man standing above her, and rose to her feet.

“Oh, Bob! what came to Tim?” she said.

“Poison. I poisoned him,” Bob answered, curt and husky.

He stooped and lifted the body in his arms, and he pointed to the collar still upon the dog's throat. “I shall bury this; it will be all right,” he said. “It will do as well.”

Then, while Mary and the children looked on in a silence broken by Tina's sobs, he laid poor Timothy in the grave and quickly filled

it in, replaced the grass he had removed, and flattened it about the little mound, knocked the soil from his spade against the apple-tree, and then, with a long look in Mary's face, but without a word, turned away.

Something there was in that mute look of his, that silent turning away, which broke down Mary's self-possession. She sprang after him and caught him with both hands upon his arm, and showed him a face working with emotion and eyes blinded with tears.

"Don't go," she implored him, in broken speech—"not without a word. Oh, Bob, forgive me; don't be cruel to me. Don't you believe that I am sorry—so sorry for it all?"

She clung to his arm, but Bob's hands were thrust deep into his trousers pockets. He did not look at her, but straight before him with eyes full of misery. His pain was none the less because it was nearly always dumb.

But Mary, womanlike, was bent on having speech from him. She could not understand how, for both of them, silence, if more painful, was best. There had been silence so long, she asked to have the situation expressed in words.

"You shall speak to me," she said. "I will not let you go until you speak. My heart is broken with thinking of you—you are so lonely, so friendless, I can't bear to live and think what a wretch I have been to you. And you were so good to me always—always! You do not think I forget? However bad I seem to you, Bob, never think that I forget. Say one word to me—say—"

"I love you," Bob said. The words burst from him against his will. He twisted his arm from her grasp, and turned and faced her.

"You see how it is," he said, speaking hoarsely and with evident effort. "I can't help it, you should have let me be. It's all I have to say to you—it's all I shall ever have to say. You don't want to hear it. Then let me be."

With that he turned abruptly away from her again, and strode through the long orchard grass and broke through the straggling fence, and was lost to sight.

In a few weeks there is an auction at Ashfields. The pigs and sheep and oxen remaining on the once well-stocked farm are brought to the hammer; the cart-horses, some of which had borne Bob upon their backs when a little fellow home from school—he had been proud to ride the "fore-horse"—are brought out, tail and mane duly decorated, one by one. Bob's mare Kitty, once the pride of her

master's heart, and very dear to him still, shares the common fate; and all the household goods undergo the like desecration. Red-faced heated women sitting on both sides the auctioneer's table give ridiculous sums for worn-out bits of carpet, faded curtains, table-cloths in holes, and squabble with each other, and fiercely wrangle with the auctioneer's clerk over their purchases. A gentleman of the Jewish nationality, carrying on a pawnbroking establishment at Midborough, secures most of the plate which had been Mrs. Burton's especial pride, and was bought with money saved from her perquisites—the egg and chicken money, the money for lambs born black, the money earned by the dairy.

Mr. Burne attends the auction, and watches with a jealous and grudging eye the dispersal of goods which long custom has taught him to regard as his own. He has a good deal to say to the various purchasers on the eccentricities familiar to him of many of the implements, corrects the auctioneer in the names and ages of the cart-horses, actually succeeds in borrowing thirty shillings of a man from a distant part of the county, and to whom he is not very well known, wherewith to purchase the lawn-mower.

And on the morrow, when the sale is over, the auctioneer's tent removed, and the place with its defaced flower-beds, its trampled grassy walks, its rooms polluted by the mud of alien feet, once more deserted, Mrs. Burne and the children go across and collect quite a heap of things which had been left by accident or thrown aside by the purchasers of mixed lots as being worthless to carry away. They pull the few winter flowers which have escaped destruction—some Christmas roses sheltered under a laurel-bush, some rather draggled-looking chrysanthemums, a sprig or two of yellow jasmines from the porch; they gather the baking pears from the tree by the kitchen door. Tina, who is small enough to be introduced through the unfastened dairy window, searches the empty rooms for possible spoil, finding only some empty tobacco tins in Bob's bedroom, and the string of birds' eggs, still hanging on the wall, which he had threaded and hung above his bed when he had been a boy.

It is the instinct of the lady of Gaythorpe Hall to annex any loose unappropriated property, and the fingers of children are always acquisitive; but none of these things are, unfortunately, of any value: the pears should have been gathered earlier; the flowers are not attractive looking enough even to put in water. The useless rubbish litters the back premises of the Hall for a time, each detail finding its way sooner or later to the dust-bin; with one exception: the string of

eggs—eggs gathered in long-ago Easter holidays, in many a happy, lonely ramble by hedge-row and grove—more fortunate than the rest, finds its way somehow into Mary's keeping.

And so Ashfields is closed, awaiting a new tenant; and in the mean time the agent carries on farming operations from his London office; and the farm is cropped again under the management of one of the oldest laborers—one who speedily proves himself less fitted for the role of master than of servant, as the fellow-laborers and his employer find to their cost—and the world goes on the same.

As for Bob, no one knows quite clearly what Bob's plans or movements are. The man was not very agreeable; he was unfortunate; his name is allowed to remain for the most part unspoken. He has to earn his bread in some fashion or other. He must swallow his pride and keep a civil tongue in his head, the neighbors say. They experience a little involuntary satisfaction in the knowledge of the difficulty and unpleasantness which will attach to all three processes for the young man in question.

Mary alone thinks of Bob Burton's future with an anxiety heightened by remorse. She sees the face which he turned upon her in the orchard on the day of Timothy's death coming before a handsomer, better-loved face in her mind's eye for many a long day.

CHAPTER XVIII

OLIVIA COMES TO STAY

DURING that winter to which Lally looked forward with so much misgiving, two events happened seriously affecting the happiness of Mr. and Mrs. Cecil Garnett. The first, and perhaps lesser, catastrophe was the sudden death at Bygrave Court of Cecil's father; the second was the advent at Gaythorpe Rectory of that father's elder daughter, bent on paying her brother and his wife a long visit. From Mrs. Lally's point of view it certainly was the latter misfortune which was the more deeply lamented. It was that one of the sisters of whom she was most entirely afraid who wrote to propose an indefinite sojourn beneath her roof. It was that Olivia who had so consistently ignored the claims of the poor little bride during her short visit to Bygrave Court; and Lally dismally foretold to Mary that the unpleasant experience would now be hers at the Rectory.

"Dear, she can't overlook you in your own house," Mary said, again and again, trying to keep up her sister's spirit. "And don't be ignored—stand up to her. Cecil will see that you are all right."

"Cecil *does* so admire his own people!" Lally said, fretfully. "It is horribly disagreeable, I can tell you, to live among people that are so much admired! I wonder if she'll be civil to you, Mamie. Shall you come down as usual?"

Come down? Of course she should come down. Mary treated with disdain the suggestion that plans of hers should be interfered with by any Olivia Garnett! She was a little afraid of Claude, it is true—in all her life she had feared no one before; the world would never hold another of whom she would be afraid.

She came, then, with undaunted courage to the encounter with the formidable lady, with many fine resolves to make Claude's sister respect her, if she failed to make her love her. It was a humiliation, recalling these grand resolutions, to find how very far off was Olivia for her part from any disturbance on Mary's account; how useless, in face of the elder woman's calm indifference, were all those secret hopes and high aspirations of Mary's.

Perfectly civil and irreproachably courteous, Miss Garnett contrived

to show a lack of interest that was worse than any insult in Mary's person and conversation. In all her behavior there was nothing which Mary could have the satisfaction of openly resenting. She was not endowed with a large stock of patience, and after a time she was guilty of attempts to provoke Claude's sister to open warfare, a condition of things in which there would have been some amusement. Her efforts were met by the same unflattering indifference.

In those early days after his father's death Claude Garnett had much to attend to in his own home. He did not come to the Rectory. His name was frequently mentioned by Miss Garnett in talking to Cecil—to Mary she did not breathe it. Mary, at first timidly, and afterwards defiantly, would introduce the beloved name, but she was cowed in spite of herself by the tranquil contemptuousness of the sister's demeanor, and soon her pride compelled her to give up all attempt to enforce her claims on Olivia's attention.

"What do you think of her?" Cecil asked his sister. Lally had received permission to go to bed, and to leave the brother and sister to their confidences over the expiring fire.

"She is about what I expected," Olivia remarked, calmly. "Handsome, decidedly—but coarse."

"Coarse?" To do him justice the Rector repeated the word with some surprise. He balanced the tips of his fingers together as he sat in his arm-chair opposite her, and looked doubtfully at his sister. He wanted to have Mary abused, but he had not expected her beauty, of which he was an unwilling admirer, should be impugned. "Coarse? How could you call her that? Her figure is good, and her skin—eh?"

"Even in those things she will be coarse in years to come. You will see. Yet it was not of the mere look of her I was thinking, but of the whole woman—the general lack of finish, of tone, of refinement. A—there may be a better word for it, but I call it—a *coarseness*. I am not surprised—I expected it, and there it is. But what could you expect? Seeing who and what she is, Cecil, what could you expect?"

Cecil coughed a little uneasily, left off balancing the tips of his fingers, crossed and uncrossed his legs.

"Ahem!" he coughed, a little sharply. "Ahem!"

"Of course," went on Olivia, quite unembarrassed, "there is your wife. I am not reflecting upon your wife. She is young and docile—the kind of looking person that some people admire. There is no reason why she should not become charming—charming! Moreover—you will admit, Cecil, there is less of her. A big woman who is also vulgar is a terror."

"There is not a trace of vulgarity in my wife," Cecil said. He frowned, he got up from his chair, and stood with his back to the fire; he cleared his throat in a way that Olivia was aware denoted ill-humor. She, however, was by no means disturbed. She lay back in her chair in her evening dress of crape and silk. She was a woman of very fine proportions, as big as Mary herself, but with a bad complexion and regular uninteresting features, and pale-colored, beautifully dressed hair. She closed her eyes and slowly stretched her limbs, comfortably aware that in her person, at least, from the crown of her smoothly waved hair to the sole of her long slim foot, there was not a trace of vulgarity. She passed over the like claim of Cecil's on the part of his wife unchallenged and with a cast-iron indifference, and coolly returned to the subject of the coarse and unfinished Mary.

"Does she still consider herself engaged?" she asked, with her eyes shut.

"Oh, of course she is engaged," Cecil answered her, with irritation. "There is no question about her engagement."

"It will never come off, you know," Olivia said, with gentle calm. "It is a pity that she should think it serious."

"But that's just what it is—it is serious," Cecil declared. "It is terribly, fatally serious. Claude is in love."

Olivia shrugged her fine shoulders beneath the semi-transparent crape. "My brother Claude!" she said, and smiled in quiet scorn.

"It sounds ridiculous, of course, but it is undoubtedly the fact. I noticed it from the first—the very first. I know Claude as well as you do, Olivia, but where she is concerned he is a different man—he isn't Claude."

"Ah!" Olivia said. She opened her eyes and sat up in her chair. "It won't last," she said; "Claude is lazy to the backbone—and this is the kind of girl to force herself on his notice, being all color and vigor and display, and save him the trouble of having to discover her charms. She told him, not in words, perhaps, but intelligibly, that he admired her, and Claude was dazzled and convinced. He only wants time for reflection—he is getting it now—and his taste is excellent. She probably offends it continually already—she will become distasteful to him. I tell you that he would be glad even now to avail himself of an excuse to break off."

"I don't think it," Cecil said. He shook his head regretfully. "I don't agree with you, Olivia."

"Ah? Well, it isn't worth the trouble of arguing about. We shall see."

That tone of superiority was irritating to the Rector. It was too much in his own line to be pleasant. He certainly did not want to range himself on Mary's side, but it was incumbent on him to put down Olivia.

"You aren't quite infallible, you know," he said, dragging down the corners of his lips. "There were some rather ghastly prophecies you made about my marriage, I remember. They haven't exactly fulfilled themselves, I am glad to say."

"Oh—your marriage?" Olivia repeated, indifferently. "That was quite another matter. Did I say anything about that?"

"You said a good deal," said Cecil, with his resentment rising at the recollection of what he had borne, meekly enough, at the time, but which had been rankling ever since—"a good deal. And in what way 'another matter?'"

"You were at liberty to please yourself; such vital interests were not concerned; it was not of so much importance to the family."

"It was of as much importance to me."

"Oh, I dare say. I naturally looked at it from another point of view. And what did I prophecy about your marriage, then, Cecil? I forget."

"You were kind enough to say, among other things, that I should repent of it in sackcloth and ashes before I died. All I wish to say is that I have been married the best part of a year, and I have not repented—not for one single instant—yet."

"I am glad to hear it. But you are not dead yet, you know," his sister reminded him, in her equable tones.

"Olivia," said the Rector, raising his voice in exasperation, "I wish you to understand, at once and forever, that I would not change my wife for any woman the world holds."

"My dear, of course you would not. Changing wives is a custom not tolerated in the country."

"And, moreover," the other went on, with rising excitement, "I would like you and all of my people to bear in mind that I expect—I expect, mind—to have my wife treated with the respect that her position as my wife demands. I expect that much, Olivia."

"Certainly," Olivia acquiesced, calmly staring at him. "Do other people not treat her with respect, then? Of course, it's a pleasure to find you so content—and your home so well managed, and Lally such an intellectual companion."

The Rector bit his lip and said nothing. Much as he adored his wife, he had a dim notion that she was neither intellectual nor a model house-keeper.

"And I gather, then," Olivia went on, "that you consider Claude's a desirable engagement?"

"I consider it disastrous," Cecil declared, hotly. "Have I not been saying as much all along? Disastrous—and it will end disastrously."

"If it ends in marriage, certainly—but it won't."

"She is different from my wife—I am afraid of Mary; and not without cause. Not," he repeated emphatically, and with a meaning glance at his sister, "without cause."

"You mean that there have been other lovers?"

"Lovers?" the Rector repeated, and then he hung his head and frowned at the carpet with compressed lips. "You must remember, Olivia, it is not my custom to talk scandal. I leave that to people of different trade, opinion—and sex."

"Mrs. Barkaway in her letters to our mother keeps hinting at something."

Cecil remembered the snub he had received from Claude on the subject of Mrs. Barkaway. He was glad of an opportunity to pass it on.

"Well, really, Olivia—Mrs. Barkaway!" he said, with an accent of contempt upon the name.

"Mrs. Barkaway? Well, certainly I'm not fond of the old woman, but if she knows anything of this girl which would render her unfit to be Claude's wife I mean to get it out of her. And as we are on the subject, I may as well tell you, Cecil, that it was with the view of interviewing Mrs. Barkaway that I came into the neighborhood."

"Then I don't know that I greatly approve your making use of my house for such a purpose," Cecil said, with dignity.

Olivia and he were not at heart the best of friends, and had never been able to talk for long without disagreement. The elder Miss Garnett had an unlimited power of making herself disagreeable in a calm and unaggressive way, and Cecil, conscious of incapacity to cope with her, was conscious also of a chronic resentment.

But Olivia held her younger brother of very little account. She heard his objections with equanimity, said a nasty thing or two in the most unmoved and gently modulated tone, and finally shook hands with him and went to bed in an unruffled calm, which may or may not have been disturbed when she found that the fire had gone out in her grate, that Lally had forgotten to provide soap and towels for her use, or a sufficient amount of blankets for her bed.

CHAPTER XIX

DEAR MRS. BARKAWAY

DURING the second week of Miss Garnett's visit to Gaythorpe, Mrs. Barkaway sent her carriage over to the Rectory to fetch her "dearest friend's daughter" to lunch with her, whereupon Lavarina at once despatched to the Hall a note to the effect that, thank goodness, the hateful old woman (it was so in the insolence and confidence of her teens that the girl spoke of the well-preserved woman of five-and-thirty) had left them at peace for the day, and Mary was to come at once and take advantage of her absence and hear the budget of enormous interest which Lally had to open to her.

The said budget consisted of remembered scraps of conversation between Olivia and Lally's husband, of detailed accounts of those many occasions when Olivia had shown herself to be "nasty," of a descriptive catalogue of Olivia's dresses, jewelry, and toilet appliances. It contained, also—oh, shameless, unprincipled Lally!—portions of letters which the hostess had managed to decipher as the visitor perused them languidly at the breakfast-table.

These various items of intelligence took so long in the delivery that Mary had not yet thought of departure when the obnoxious visitor returned from Midborough.

"We all thought you'd be sure to stay to dinner," Lally said, and there was no disguise in tone or face of the disappointment she felt.

But Olivia chose to be unusually agreeable. She was thankful to be back, she said. Mrs. Barkaway was not exactly a favorite with her. Cecil would remember how they had all disliked their mother's friend as children? The tiresome old lady talked so much. Olivia's head ached with her talk! She was glad to be home in time for a cup of Lally's delicious tea.

(At which compliment Lally, making a frightened face at Mary, heaped in many spoonfuls of bohea into the cooling water, and violently shook the teapot.)

The talk, Olivia declared, had been of dreadfully uninteresting people—people of whom she knew nothing, nor wished to know anything—Midborough people. And what a wearisome lonely drive she

had had, a raw mist in the air; she would have been so far more comfortable over the Rectory fire.

Altogether Olivia was very agreeable. Lally, but for her dislike and awe of the woman, might have repented of some of the confidences she had been making to Mary. The Rector's little wife had a mind not at all above gossip, and listened with artless gratification while Olivia, in her languid, indifferent fashion, retailed for the general benefit some of the items of Midborough news. Although she seemed careless of the effect she produced, Miss Garnett's slow utterances were by no means without point, while they were often marked by an ill-nature which generally passed muster for wit.

Mary half closed her eyes to listen. She was so full of vitality herself that the languor and extreme quiet of the other woman had a fascination for her; the level, agreeable voice was very soothing to the nerves. If Claude had lived all his life with women of that cold, slow temperament, she understood better why her own occasional vehemence so much surprised him. She listened not at all to the matter of the conversation going on, but pleased herself with catching now and again an intonation, a turn of expression which reminded her of Claude, with watching through drooping lids the features which were so much like his, with wondering at the possibility of so plain a woman in anything resembling so handsome a man.

She was startled out of her dreaming by the sound of a familiar name.

"By the way," Olivia was saying, "is there a person of the name of Burton living in Gaythorpe?"

"Burton? There was such a person," the Rector answered, pricking his ears. To himself he said, "Olivia has heard the tale of the kiss on the public road. I must let her know that I have already put Claude in possession of that incident." "He was not a person of whom it would interest you much to hear," he went on aloud. ("Lally, dear, I greatly fear the water did not boil again. Olivia's tea looks quite depressingly pale.")

"Delicious—thanks," said Olivia, who had only looked at the decoction, and put it away from her.)

"Burton was the son of a bankrupt farmer in the place—an ignorant, heathenish old man—no great loss to the parish, I assure you."

"He and his father and mother were our oldest and kindest friends," Mary said quickly, lifting her head; "our very best and kindest."

"Indeed?" Miss Garnett said, with tranquil unconcern. "And a Mr.—Spilling, then? Who is Mr. Spilling? Is he also a friend?"

"We know him," said Mary. "He is not so great a friend." She would not let her eyes droop beneath Olivia's gaze; but for some reason the blood had rushed to cheek and brow. Olivia seemed to contemplate her confusion with a mild surprise, then languidly moved her eyes to Lavarina, whose mouth had dropped open and whose cheek was pale.

"Mr. Spilling?" said Cecil, loftily, from his place on the rug. "Mr. Spilling is a young man with, they say, forty thousand a year: the son of a London tradesman—a man of not agreeable repute, a drunkard, gambler, a man of disreputable associates—a man to whom I have forbidden my wife even to bow in the street. If Mrs. Barkaway was driven to Spilling as a subject of conversation, I am exceedingly sorry for you both. His is a name not often mentioned in decent houses."

"I think you exaggerate," Mary said, valiantly. "Why need you make him worse than he is? He is kind-hearted, liberal as the day. I have known him do very generous things."

"He is—an unprofitable subject for discussion," said the Rector, with an air of finality.

"Far be it from me to wish to discuss him," said Olivia, with a yawn. "Mrs. Barkaway mentioned that he had returned from—somewhere—to Midborough, bringing this other person—this young man—this—"

"Bob?" exclaimed Mary and Lally involuntarily in surprise. "Is Bob with him?"

Miss Garnett smiled with a kind of lazy indulgence upon them. "I don't think Mrs. Barkaway spoke of him by his Christian name," she said. "But he is quite likely to be 'Bob.' Mrs. Barkaway was mentioning that she had had to discharge a favorite servant because of an undesirable friendship with a groom of the establishment. She said a great deal of unpleasantness had arisen. She mentioned that Mr.—Burton?—had been a parishioner, and I thought Cecil might be interested."

Before Mary left that afternoon she beckoned her sister on one side.

"Lally," she said, impressively, "I don't like that woman. Did you notice that she watched us while they spoke of Bob and Herbert Spilling? She means no good either to you or me. Be very

careful. Don't let her get onto that subject with you. Put her off if she asks questions. She is driving at something."

Lally had turned quite white; she regarded her sister with eyes wide with dismay, her lip drooping after a pretty fashion it had, which made her face, in trouble or grief, very childish and sweet.

"Don't be foolish," Mary said, more lightly, for the girl was on the verge of tears, and was trembling. "How silly you are, Lally—one can't say a word to you now."

"Oh, Mary! For all the millions of the earth I wouldn't have Cecil know!" Lally cried, whimpering and vague. "And he said he'd never tell—he promised—oh, Mary, you know he promised?"

"He promised me. He took an oath," said Mary. "I know that he will not breathe a word—I know that he is safe—only—"

"Then how unkind it is of you to frighten me so," Lally cried, fretfully. "If you only knew how my heart beats when I'm frightened— It's horrid enough having Olivia—you need not have frightened me."

When Olivia Garnett left the Rectory and set out on the round of visits she meditated before her return to Bygrave Court, no one much regretted her departure. During her stay she had made several visits to Midborough, although the first had apparently afforded her so little gratification, and the newsy and talkative Mrs. Barkaway came once to the Rectory at Gaythorpe, and studied Lally a good deal, and had much to say to Olivia. But it was not until her brother was driving Miss Garnett to the station on the day she left his roof that he learned she had been successful in extracting from Mrs. Barkaway's overwhelming amount of talk that item which she hoped was to influence her brother's relations with the Burne family.

Lally, the house being clear of the hated presence, luxuriated in her new liberty. She lay back in the chair which had been appropriate to Olivia, and basked in the warmth of a blazing fire and the delightful sense of recovered freedom.

It didn't signify what there was for lunch—dinner could take care of itself. She would not have to weigh every word, to repress every impulse, to smother every yawn; she would not have to be conscious of the two pairs of eyes watching her—one pair coldly hostile, the other affectionately anxious lest she should transgress. *She was*—oh, so tired! and she would go to sleep when she liked

and be idle when she liked, and chatter and laugh and even cry un-reproved. For she knew that Cecil, too, in his secret heart was relieved to have his wife to himself again, and for a time, at least, he would be kind and indulgent to her now that Olivia's presence was removed.

How delightful it was ! Lally drew out her house-keeping press and examined its various divisions—not so much as a ha'penny stamp was there ; she felt of the pence-bag which hung on the bell-handle—empty ! Mrs. Garnett was not in position to give a practical demonstration of the popular theory that three mouths cost no more than one. There had to be lavish outlay in tea, in butter, in tinned soups during Olivia's stay. The one tiny cloud in her clear sky of happiness that morning was the recollection of a bill at the village shop which ought to have been paid out of that week's house-keeping allowance, and which was running still.

"It'll come all right, somehow," said Lally, determined not to be downcast ; and she rang the bell and sent a servant to Mrs. Le Grice's for a quarter of a pound of jujubes to go down in the bill.

She must eat them before Cecil came back, for he by no means approved of his wife's predilection for goodies. That might be taken for granted, Lally thought. The Garnetts, it seemed to her, consistently disapproved of everything that was pleasant.

Lavarina's education, generally, left so much to be desired, her handwriting and spelling being specially defective, that Cecil for her own advancement in these arts gave her each week his sermon to copy. This was a stupendous undertaking for Lally. A great many shortcomings in house-keeping and other works had to be excused to her because of this labor of getting Cecil's sermon done ; but, as a matter of fact, by the end of the week it never was completed. The Rector generally finished by making his own fair copy when Lally was in bed on the Saturday night.

Here was Friday, and the ponderous task not even begun ! But Cecil would acknowledge how impossible it was for her to get anything done while Olivia was here. Soon, when she had rested herself sufficiently over the fire, and had luxuriated for a time in the secret delights of jujubes, she would set to work so that Cecil should be pleased.

But she fell asleep in the warmth and silence with one of the forbidden sweetmeats in her mouth, and it was not until the wheels of the returning dog-cart grated over the gravel before the window that she awoke. At that sound, with a start, and her heart in her mouth,

she sprang up, and hid away her screw of jujubes, and hurriedly threw her writing-materials on the table, and plunged the fingers which held the pen wildly into the inkpot, and began at a rattling pace upon the text of the sermon.

So engrossed did she wish to appear with her work, that she did not lift up her head when her husband came in. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair ruffled, and signs of sleep were still in her eyes, but of these things she was happily unconscious. She rushed on with her writing, expecting him to come round and find fault with her blots as usual, to lean over her shoulder to cross out the words she had repeated and point to those she had omitted, and to kiss the crown of her head. He did none of these things, but only remained on the other side of the table in silence.

"What *very* hard words you've put in this week, dear!" she said, and made an affectation of sighing wearily, and threw down her pen and looked across with an irrepressibly joyous smile at her husband. "And is she safely off, Cecil?" she began.

But the words and the smile died away, and the color faded out of her cheeks as she met her husband's eyes.

"He has found out about Mrs. Le Grice's bill," said Lally to herself, with a sinking of the heart.

"I want to speak to you," he said, in a voice that in all his many lecturings and upbraidings she had never heard before. In a moment of time she had affrightedly turned over in her mind all those small sins of hers against his rules and commandments which she had lately committed. "I have a question to ask you. I expect you to give me a truthful answer."

She made no reply, but rose from her chair and looked at him with wide eyes and white lips fallen apart.

"Say 'before God I will speak the truth!'"

"Oh, Cecil—Cecil! Do not be cruel to me—do not frighten me!"

He looked at her sternly, and his pallid face was drawn with fear or pain.

"Of what are you afraid?" he said. "Say what I have told you."

It was worse, worse than Mrs. Le Grice, said Lally to her beating heart; it was worse than the *Family Herald* hidden under the cushion of her chair; it was worse than the whole accumulated heap of the harmless fibs she had told him from time to time. It must be—oh, where was Mary? Oh, Cecil—Cecil!

"Before God I will speak the truth," he repeated, relentlessly.

Her lips moved with the words, but only the sound of a shuddering sob came.

"Listen. About a year ago you went to London—you and your sister. You remember it?"

"Yes." Oh, it was—it was the worst!

"You went to the house of your father's sister. You went to buy garments for—our marriage. You stayed two nights and you came home. Is that so? I know of myself that it is—but answer."

"Oh, Cecil—yes."

"I want you to tell me what else occurred."

No answer came from the girl's shaking lips; she looked at him with a helpless fascinated gaze, and was silent; but he saw that her pretty hands, with the great blot of ink on one of the middle fingers, began to wander up and down and to stray aimlessly about the bosom of her dress, a sign with her of terror and distress. He moistened his dry lips as he looked at her and went on.

"One of you, for one of those two nights, left your aunt's house. To go—where?"

His voice was very strained and painful. With a sob she called his name, and clutched with trembling fingers at the folds of her dress.

"To go where?" he repeated, with a stamp of the foot. But he could not bear the gaze of her terrified eyes, and he went near to her and caught in a grasp, which hurt them, the nervously straying hands. "To go where?" he asked, in a whisper. "Remember, you have sworn before God to speak the truth. Where?"

"To—oh, Cecil!—to Herbert Spilling's."

He held her hands tighter in his unconscious, painful grasp.

"Before God you have sworn to speak the truth. Which was it?" he asked, in the husky whisper of which alone his sonorous voice was capable. "Which was it? You? You or Mary?"

A light came into the round despairing eyes that had been helplessly staring into his; they wavered and fell; her face, with its look of abject terror, changed a little beneath his gaze. For a minute she held herself perfectly still—a minute that seemed to him an age. Then, in a whisper which barely reached him, there came in one word the answer:

"Mary."

The husband drew a long breath. "I knew it," he said. He let go her hands, and she sank into her chair and flung her arms along the table and dropped her head upon them among the sermon papers,

the books, the inkstands, and wept with a deep-drawn, stormy sobbing which frightened him.

"Dear one," he said, "do not cry. I forgive you, Lally. Darling, do not be frightened; I have forgiven you."

He was trembling himself and very pale. The shadow of a great calamity had terrified him. He had never acknowledged to himself that he had feared; he could not define the agony which had seized upon him. But it had been there, and, passing, had left him weaker than a child.

With dumb but eloquent caresses for a few minutes he hung above the pretty dishevelled head—for a few minutes in which his voice failed him; then, tremulously, he began:

"It was an awful secret to keep from me, Lally. You should have trusted me—you should have told me. Between husband and wife there should be perfect confidence. But you did not think of the wrong to me—you thought only of saving your sister—and that was generous of you—even if it was a mistake. I have forgiven you—do not cry."

But, as if her very heart were broken, Lally sobbed on.

The Rector made a somewhat feeble effort after his usual authoritative tone.

"You are making yourself ill, Lally. Lally, collect yourself. Lally, I command you to be calm."

But, finding that even his commands, strange to say, had no effect on his wife's emotion, he pocketed his sternness with some relief to himself, and, kneeling beside her, pulled her forcibly into his arms and tried to comfort her with warm caresses and tender assurances and broken whispers.

And Lally, having exhausted herself, soon lay very still and strengthless. She made no verbal answer to his tender appeals, but whenever he would have released her she clutched him spasmodically by the neck, and hid her face against him, and would not allow him to stir. And when at length he persuaded her to let him take her to the couch, he noticed that she would lie there with her face pressed into its cushions, and would not look at him at all.

"She is ashamed that I should look upon her now that I know of her sister's disgrace," he said. There were many questions that he longed to ask, much that he felt impelled to say, but he feared to excite and distress her further, and he put a restraint on himself and was silent.

All that day she neither looked at nor spoke to him. Once or

twice he forcibly raised her head, but she only pulled it from him and buried it deeper in the cushions. When he found that she would eat no lunch, that she would not touch the cup of cocoa, of which delicacy she was inordinately fond, and which he made her with his own hands, he feared she must be ill. Then he lifted her in his arms and carried her to her room, and—certificated in Love's school, even Cecil found himself an accomplished nurse—carefully undressed her and put her to bed.

During this process she spoke not a word, but when he bent over her before he left to go down-stairs, she suddenly flew up in the bed and showed him her tear-blotted, feverish face.

"Cecil—it was a secret I told you—you will never, never tell? Promise me—never!"

"My dearest," he said, "I cannot bind myself to that. Do not ask me."

"Oh, but you can—you can! I should not get over it—I should die—and you would never forgive yourself. Promise!"

She flung her arms around his neck and clung to him, reiterating, "Promise! promise!"

"I will not—I must not—do not ask me," he said. "I make no promise. Lally, this is a horrible disgrace which your sister has put upon us—upon you, on me, and all who belong to us, now or ever will belong. It is not only that she has covered her own head with shame, but even our children, Lally, will have to suffer for this wickedness of hers."

"She is not wicked!" the girl cried, excitedly; "Mary is not wicked! Oh, you don't know, you don't know how good Mary is!"

"Good!" her husband echoed, coldly. "The heroine of such a story—good!"

"Cecil, you will not tell Mary—if you must tell other people—and I know you won't—I know you won't be so cruel—yet promise me you will never tell her. Promise me that! I will not let you go until you promise me."

"It is Mary whom I must tell—and first of all," he said. "I shall see your sister to-morrow, and tell her then."

He unloosed the arms about his neck, and Lally, with a groan, dropped away from him, and hid her face again in the pillow without another word.

But when her husband's back was turned she flew out of bed, bolted the door upon him, and scribbled a note in pencil on the back of an old letter. This she at once despatched to Mary at Gaythorpe Hall.

CHAPTER XX

MARY IS DIPLOMATIC

IN reply to the urgent note which Mary received, she presented herself at the Rectory by ten o'clock the next morning. It was a day on which the Rector performed his parish rounds; his absence from the breakfast-hour till lunch could be depended on. Mary found her sister still in bed, and was alarmed at the tear-blurred face, the swollen eyelids, the frightened, appealing eyes which looked up at her from the pillow.

She stayed in her sister's room for the best part of an hour, and when she left that apartment, Lally, tired out with excitement and much talking and weeping, turned upon her pillow and fell into a sleep of exhaustion, and was for a time at peace. But Mary, as she closed the door and came down-stairs, looked anything but tranquil. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shone with anger, her brow was knit. She was so preoccupied that she did not notice the presence of her brother-in-law, who, standing by the library door, watched her descent until she stood before him in the hall.

"Oh, there you are!" she said, not with any sign of joy at his presence, and she nodded to him in a way that irritated the Rector, he could scarcely have said why.

There are moments, all too few for our souls' good, however unpleasant may be the experience, when we are disagreeably compelled to see ourselves with the eyes with which others regard us. As Mary, splendid in her physical strength and beauty, recognized him with her careless nod, Cecil suddenly felt himself to be a small man in her sight, mentally and physically shrivelled and shrunken—altogether small and narrow and mean. He had often averred that he did not admire Mary's style of beauty, preferring the slight and fair type of woman of which his wife was a favorable specimen, yet was he curiously conscious of the splendor of Mary's appearance, and, after a grudging, jealous fashion, knew when she was looking at her best, and always secretly resented the fact that she did so.

In spite of that disgraceful secret of hers which had now been revealed to him, although he had the melancholy satisfaction of

knowing that his suspicions and intentions with regard to her were justified and right, he felt at a disadvantage with her; as with that careless, undeferential nod she recognized his presence, she seemed to him to emphasize the fact that he was a colorless and insignificant person, and that her opinion of him was small.

"Lally wants to be undisturbed," Mary said. "I think she will sleep now."

He pushed open the library door and invited her to enter. "There is a word or two I wish to say to you," he said, as he followed her in. "I may as well warn you that it is of a painful nature. It will be better for both of us, perhaps, to get it over as quickly as possible."

"If it is disagreeable, pray don't let there be any unnecessary delay," Mary said, with a sarcastic inflection of voice. "I've no doubt I know what you are wishing to hold forth about. Begin as soon as you like."

"Perhaps it would be in better taste not to assume that flippant tone; but you will please yourself. In speaking to you as I am about to do, I am performing a task disagreeable enough to me, but which, as I conceive it to be my duty, I do not intend to shirk."

"I am sure you won't shirk anything," Mary said. "That would be too much to expect of you."

"Mary, I have become aware of a—of a circumstance concerning you which has caused me infinite pain."

"Oh no," she said, quickly interrupting him. "You are not very much pained, I think. You have always suspected me of being a bad lot, you know. It will be satisfactory to you to prove it."

"Pain," he said, raising his voice, and with an affectation of not noticing the interruption—"pain and shame."

Her cheeks flashed crimson. "Don't apply that word to me," she said, fiercely. "You had better not. I forbid you. I have done foolish things enough in my life—things of which such a man as you might not approve, perhaps—I don't know or care—but I have done nothing to make either you or any one ashamed."

"And you, yourself?" he asked, looking at her with his eyes of cold condemnation. "Do you feel no shame?"

"Not one atom."

"Then, so much the more reason that I should feel shame for you," he said, with deep solemnity. "Is it possible you can know of what I am speaking?"

"Lally has told me. It is of what occurred in London a year

ago, when she and I went up to Aunt Mary's before your marriage."

"I heard a report which horrified me—which I refused to believe—until Lally, in tears and shame and suffering, confessed that it was true."

"Yes; Lally has told me that she confessed it."

"I compelled her to tell the truth. She is not to blame."

"That is a matter of opinion. I blame her—I blame her, and I have told her so."

"Then, besides being a shameless, you are a heartless woman."

Mary, looking in his face, laughed contemptuously, in spite of the light of anger in her half-shut eyes.

"You think so?" she said. "Do not be too sure. And do not be too free with the use of that word 'shame.' Take my advice, for once, and do not use it in this connection. Ignorance there was—and daring—and foolishness incredible—nothing more. Remember that, will you?—it will be better. And now, if you have said what you had to say, wouldn't it be wise to make a finish? You are not preaching a sermon, so there is no necessity to spin out the agony. You never liked me, you know, so I shall not suffer from the loss of your esteem. And as the matter lies between you and me and Lally, I dare say we shall none of us be much the worse."

The Rector was aghast at her coolness. "A little more than you seem to think is involved," he said, slowly. "You have, for one thing, forfeited your right to mix on equal terms with well-conducted and honorable women. I shudder to think of young girls ignorantly exposed to the danger of such association. I shudder to think that my own wife might have had her sense of right and wrong entirely perverted by you. It is my duty, for the future, to protect her at least. I wish for no open scandal, and do not desire to treat you with undue severity, but I must ask you to stay away from my house."

The angry light in Mary's eyes changed to a light of astonishment and dismay.

"Not to see Lally?" she said, slowly. "What do you suppose Lally herself will say to that?"

"I shall not inquire," he said. "Neither shall I distress her by entering into any explanation. My wish in such a case will be to my wife law."

"Very well. Then I will go. You have always hated me—but

I have said something like that before, and I don't know why I repeat it, for it is a matter of no moment—and now you will have the satisfaction of reflecting that you have turned me from your house. But you will be so good as to remember that if Lally is your wife, she is my sister. If she should want me or should even think that she wants me at any time, I shall come to her if you turn me out of doors fifty times over."

"I believe you to be capable of doing any undignified thing," he said to her, with frigid scorn.

"I am capable of a great deal," she said, and laughed, and turned away.

"Wait!" he said, as she reached the door. "There's just one other thing I wish to mention to you. My brother—"

She stopped instantly, and he saw her whole body stiffen into attention.

"I consider it my duty to acquaint my brother with this tale."

"If you did that, you would regret it to your dying day."

"And if I knew that that must be, I hope that I should still do my duty."

Cecil Garnett was not a cruel man, but he did feel a satisfaction in having moved her. He saw that her face was pale, and knew that she was frightened.

"The tale is nothing to Claude," she said.

"Nothing to Claude? Such a tale as this 'nothing' to such a man as my brother?"

"If you think that it will make any difference in our relations to each other, you are wrong. If you think it will stop our marriage—"

"Do you suppose him to be so besotted in his feeling for you that he has lost the feelings of a gentleman, the instincts of a man of honor?"

"I tell you that it will make no difference."

"We shall see," he said.

She came up swiftly before him, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Now listen," she said. She was as tall as he, and he noticed that the eyes that looked into his were steady, that the hand upon his shoulder was quite firm, that her tone and gestures were those more of command than entreaty. "I ask you not to do this thing. If Lally were here, she would implore you not to do it. You will make a great mistake. I warn you the tale is quite other than you

think, the consequences will be altogether different. Do not meddle in it. What good do you expect to do? To punish me? I shall not be punished, I assure you—quite other than that. To please Claude? Do you think he would thank you? Claude? For slander of me? You don't know Claude very well if you dare to go to him with such a purpose as that."

"On this condition only I will consent to remain silent: that you yourself, and at once, tell my brother the story; or that you at once release him from his engagement. Will you undertake to do either of those things?"

Mary paused for a moment and seemed to consider. Then she took her hand from his shoulder, her eyes fell from his, and she drew back from him.

"I shall do neither—and for this reason," she said, slowly—"for the reason that there are no secrets between Claude and me—that he knows already—that I have told him."

Cecil stood before her and stared into her face in petrified silence. Claude knew this history—this disgraceful history—and intended to marry the heroine of it! *Claude?*

"You are attempting to deceive me," he said, his voice sharp with surprise and suspicion. "Will you swear that Claude knows this tale?"

"Why should I swear? Am I not to be believed? Can I not speak the truth? Yet, if you wish it, I will swear. I will swear that I made a clean breast to him—I told him all. Everything I could remember that man, woman, or child could rake up against me, I have told him. Now, do as you like. As far as Claude and I are concerned, nothing that you can do or say will affect us—not for a day, an hour, a heart-beat. It is your friendship with him which will suffer. Tell him if you like."

She went then without a further word and left him, lost in amazement.

The letters which Mary hitherto had written to Claude had come straight from her heart, and with them her head had had nothing to do. They were as guileless, as artless, as sweetly unreasonable, as incoherent as the generality of *billets-doux*. But that night before she slept she concocted a letter which was none of these things, and over which she spent much thought and ingenuity.

In it she mentioned for the first time his sister's name; told how *she had hoped* and endeavored to gain that sister's liking; how she

had failed, Olivia Garnett being too prejudiced against her ever to become her friend. She related how the perception of this fact had opened the eyes which she had wilfully kept shut with regard to the behavior to her of the other members of his family, and the manner in which all of them too evidently regarded his engagement. She mentioned that even Cecil, who, for his own and his wife's sake, might have been expected to take a different view, conceived it, in this matter, his duty to be Mary's enemy rather than her friend; he had lately forced her to see, she added, that he intended to leave no stone unturned to prevent what he conscientiously believed to be disastrous to his brother.

All of these things, Mary said, had made her not only uneasy, but unhappy. They had set her wondering whether she had been thinking of his welfare or her own when she had agreed to marry him; they had set her asking herself which was dearer to her heart, his happiness or hers. She had begun to suspect her own motives, and to ask of herself whether she would not be better showing her love to him by giving him up than by marrying him.

What did he say to that question? She wanted to be reassured on the point. Would he, to humor her, say once again from his heart that, compared with her, all the rest of the world was as nothing? Would he, at the same time, promise her that whoever was against her he would be for her, that he trusted her entirely? Would he swear to believe no word against her that was not spoken by her own lips? If the least whisper detrimental to her reached his ears, would he come honestly to her and ask for an explanation?

Would he undertake to satisfy her on these points, and make her more than ever proud of him and happy, or would he say that her uneasiness was justified, and that he wished her to give him up?

All this, written with much neatness and in carefully chosen language, she read over and over, and folded and put in the envelope; to withdraw it hastily at the last moment to scrawl an all but illegible, ill-considered postscript which, although it entirely spoiled the effect of the body of the letter, restored to her the peace of mind which that had cost her.

"Of course, you know which of these things you are to do," the last blotted lines ran. "If you were to be so cruel as to do the wrong one, I should die."

CHAPTER XXI

"FORGIVE US OUR VIRTUES—FORGIVE US"

WHEN the Rev. Cecil Garnett had heard from his sister the story which Mrs. Barkaway—having extracted it from her maid, who for her part had learned a vague account of it from the voluble Charles the groom—had been too happy to repose in the keeping of her "dearest friend's daughter," the possibility that the tale should have reference to any other than Mary was not referred to between the pair. That contingency, however, was present in the mind of Miss Garnett, who secretly disapproved of the sister-in-law she possessed as greatly as of the one who was promised her; and it lurked as a horrible possible calamity in the background of the Rector's mind.

"Claude will have to be told," Olivia had said. "It won't be a pleasant thing to do, but it will certainly be your duty to tell him, Cecil; and I suppose you will do it."

"If it be my duty I trust I shall not shrink from it," Cecil had said.

After his interviews with his wife and his sister-in-law, with a heart relieved of the secret trouble—a trouble unacknowledged to himself—he wrote at once to his sister informing her that the story so damning to Mary's reputation—the story which—God help her! was true—was already known to her future husband. Therefore was there no necessity for that unpleasant task which both had thought it would be Cecil's duty to perform.

In reply came a letter from Olivia, boldly discrediting this statement.

"I don't believe a word of it," she wrote. "A person who could be guilty of such conduct, remember, would not hesitate to lie. This matter is of immense importance to all of us. Imagine a woman so shameless and so false becoming my elder brother's wife! Dear Cecil, go at once to Claude—do not trust to the post—the letter might never reach him, and immense issues are at stake. Go to him, for all our sakes, and tell him this tale."

And Cecil went.

Until Olivia's letter came to him the possibility of Mary's having

lied had not occurred to him, but the idea suggested, he saw at once that it was so. The girl, to her other enormities, had added this last and worst misdoing—she had made a fool and a dupe of her brother-in-law. Already precious time had been wasted. No more grass should be allowed to grow underfoot.

That letter which had cost Mary so much thought did not give unmixed pleasure to its recipient. Claude read it with a faint frown of distress upon his brow. The fact that his future wife had been treated with discourtesy by his people he knew and resented, but he was too proud to complain to them, and too sensitive to discuss the matter with Mary. He was of opinion that for her also the dignified course was to ignore the matter. As his wife she would be in a position to treat with such slights—until then let her ignore them; and this rhodomontade about the possibility of his giving her up—how unworthy of her and of him! Had he not given her proof that he wished to marry her, had she not made it clear to him that she desired to be his wife? It seemed to Claude that there was something vulgar even in this playing at the possibility of their changing their minds on such a subject. And this appeal to him to trust her—to believe in her whatever he might hear. Was not that also in wretched taste? Did it not savor of the shop-girl and the bar-maid of questionable antecedents rather than of the wife of Cæsar, who must be above suspicion?

Claude of his own accord had given his word to Mary that that grievous incident, which had once so nearly separated them, should not dwell in his mind. Loyally he turned from the recollection of it, and at times did even succeed in forgetting. But at those moments when a word or a look of her's startled his sleeping suspicions, the "*affaire* Bob Burton" turned uppermost in his mind. The fact that she had deceived him—deceived that other miserable specimen of humanity—acted a lie to him—was an ever ready torture, because, although he would have died rather than divulge the derogatory fact, he was jealous as well as suspicious of Mary's past—as jealous as poor Bob or even the drink-inflamed Mr. Spilling was capable of being. He loathed to think that other kisses than his had been on her lips, that his caresses were, so to say, stale experiences for her—

He read the letter twice, and instead of storing it away with others from the same hand in the inner pocket of his coat, he laid it carefully upon the fire, and watched it burn. When he wrote to

Mary, he resolved not to answer those frivolous demands upon him. She knew that they were superfluous—he would treat them as being so.

But the unlucky letter had left, so to say, an evil taste in his mouth. All day long he was conscious of pin-pricks of discomfort and a sense of irritation and a suspicion of offence.

And then Cecil came. All day there had been a gloom on Cecil's brow and an uneasiness in his manner; for now that the moment had come to perform the duty which he believed to be his, he rather shirked the task. It was not until almost the moment of departure that he forced himself to go through with it.

Claude turned round from the window of that room which had been his father's sanctum and now was his as Cecil, with tightly drawn lip and portentous brow, entered.

On Claude's handsome face since his father's death there had appeared an added line or so of care, for he was troubled about many things. The estate had proved to be more heavily encumbered than he expected; each day brought him the knowledge of fresh liabilities, of further complications. His mother and sisters were nearly entirely dependent on him. They were women difficult to deal with in such a crisis; women to whom the luxuries of life were necessities; who seemed inclined to continue their habit of taking them as a matter of course, showing no curiosity about their source. Up to the present Claude had not summoned the hardihood to point out to them that any fresh mode of life would be necessary. Out of the question to commence his married life in the same house with three women hostile to his wife; but how, out of the crippled estate, to manage a sufficient allowance to provide a separate residence for them?

And in his heart he was impatient to begin his new life at once. He wanted to be able to take the woman he loved away from what seemed to him her wretched surroundings: leading a lonely life among the uncongenial women of his household, he longed for the delight of her companionship and the refreshment of her beauty. The scant intercourse that he held with his future wife was at present obtained at the cost of much that was unspeakably distasteful to himself. He had a brotherly affection for Cecil, but the parson was hardly a companion after his own heart, while the hospitality of his home, with poor childish Lally at its head, left much to be desired. Even temporary association with Mary's exasperatingly stupid, indolent, indifferent father, and her mother of the dirty finery and the

low moral sense, was an almost unbearable mortification of the flesh. Altogether, the cost to him was more than he would have paid for anything less entirely dear.

At moments, in the natural impatience of which, however, he was careful to give no sign, he said to himself that he would leave his mother and his sisters at the Court to work their will there, to manage as they could, and he and Mary would risk it and take their chance. They would get away from all that sickened and wearied and disgusted them, and begin life together! But this was only at moments of ecstasy, and was never rationally considered. A man must take up the cloak of his fathers, and must not shirk the responsibilities of his inheritance even though a lifetime of debt, of difficulty, of idleness were involved. Claude, who was conservative to the backbone, knew that he must stand to his post.

He was gazing out rather hopelessly upon the trim-kept flower borders on which his window looked as Cecil entered. Certain matters of business awaited his decision; and, in his depressed condition, he was not capable of the necessary effort of thought. It had wearied him inexpressibly to go through all the papers which it behooved him to understand; it hurt him grievously to review his position, to reflect on all that should have been theirs and was irretrievably lost to the family. The difficulties forever cropping up appeared to him, in this languid mood, to be insurmountable. Even the image of Mary, always devoutly enshrined in his heart, failed to comfort him materially to-day; for Mary had written a foolish letter recalling old grievances, and asking him to believe in her. As if to believe in her were not the necessity of his very soul!

"You're not off yet?" he asked, turning to his brother with his watch in his hand. "There's a good fifteen minutes before you want to start."

"There is time, I know," Cecil said, and then he swallowed something dry in his throat and began: "Claude, something has become known to me lately—something impossible to ignore. I wish to speak to you on the subject. I think it my duty to do so."

"Whom does it concern?" Claude asked. He drew himself upright and stood instantly upon the defensive. That word "duty" on some lips has an ominous sound and savors of offensiveness.

"Concerning Mary, in the first place, and through her you, and through you all of us."

"Then, perhaps, you had better be silent," Claude said. "Anything that concerns my future wife I prefer to hear from herself."

"According to her, you have already heard this from herself," Cecil went on quietly. "It is that last year—the month before my marriage—she ran away from her aunt's house in town, and went to the house and to the protection of that drunken, unspeakable ruffian—Spilling."

Claude continued to look at his brother; the instinct to hide what he felt did not even at that moment desert him, and he would not shift his gaze, but the blood rushed violently to his face. Something seemed to hammer in his temples with a noise that temporarily deafened him; a pain that turned him sick clutched at his heart. Cecil waited until that dark flush on face and brow had subsided, leaving his brother of a deathly pallor, then went on with his tale.

"The story appeared to me so terrible, so appalling, that I thought it my duty to relate it at once to you. When I spoke to Mary of my intention, she informed me that you already knew, that she had confessed all to you—had told you this history of her disgrace."

A sound that might have been a curse or a groan fell from between Claude's locked teeth. It was unintelligible to the Rector's ears, and he wished to be quite sure of all his brother said on the occasion.

"I beg your pardon?" he murmured.

Claude moistened his dry lips.

"Did she—did Mary say that—I knew?"

"She said so most distinctly, Claude. She said she herself had told you."

He waited eagerly there, pricking his ears for the denial he expected, but none came. Claude had turned his back on him, and was apparently gazing out of the window.

"It appeared to me and to Olivia, who is in my confidence, that a woman guilty of such conduct might not hesitate to tell a lie. It appeared to us that we must not, for the sake of saving ourselves pain, risk your marrying Mary Burne ignorant of her shame—I beg your pardon—did you say anything?"

Claude had said nothing, only drawn his breath a little sharply because of that agony in his heart.

"It was of yourself and of your happiness I thought," the Rector went on, "but Olivia, who always has the welfare of the family very much at heart, was most anxious that you should be acquainted with the history for the family's sake."

"Curse the family," Claude said. He said it softly and deliberately, yet with a startling expression of sincerity. Cecil stopped and

stared at his brother's back, shocked and offended. There was between them the silence of a minute, and then very languidly Claude spoke. "Your time is getting away, you know," he said. "The train don't wait even for such enjoyable times as these. If you've quite finished had you not better go?"

Cecil looked with hurt surprise at his brother's immovable back. He had wounded the man nearly to the death, but he had no appreciation of the fact. That horrible period of suspense and terror he had himself experienced while waiting for Lally's explanation did not enlighten him as to what his brother suffered: to such a degree he lacked the wisdom of sympathy, the knowledge which comes of the power to put one's self in another's place! Those moments of unacknowledged doubt had been very hideous to Cecil, but the suffering had been his—and for Lally! It was not within the range of possibility that Claude could feel anything approaching to that agony—and for Mary!

He waited in surprise and disgust. He was aware that he had acted in an entirely disinterested fashion, with no regard to his own comfort; even if no acknowledgment of his services were to be made to him, he felt that at least he ought not to be so summarily dismissed.

"I think," he said, with an air of injured dignity, "that I have hardly deserved this tone from you, Claude. Considering the personal distaste I have had for the task I have fulfilled, it seems to me that you owe me a little more than this."

Claude turned round from the window, showing a face like a mask of stone.

"What is it that you want of me?" he asked.

"I want the satisfaction of knowing if my errand here has been superfluous or no—if it is true, as she said, that you already knew of and condoned this miserable business? If Mary told you—"

"She has said that she did so?"

"Oh yes. She has said!"

"And she confessed the tale also to you?"

"She did not hesitate—not for an instant. It appeared to me, Claude, terrible as it is to say so, that she was quite insensible to the heinousness of her sin. Is it possible that you knew of it?"

"She said as much." Claude repeated. His voice, in spite of the forced quiet of his words, grated upon the ear.

"Certainly. She was positive on the point."

"Then you have your answer—she has told you. What more is there to be said?"

"Very well. It is as you like," Cecil sighed, but he was by no means resigned. "You are not treating me with confidence, with friendship—but do as you please—"

"I will—I will. Go!" Claude burst out in an agony of impatience; but in an instant he recovered himself—"before you miss the train," he added, softly.

"I shall not miss the train," Cecil cried, "and if I did, what is the importance of such an ill-chance compared with the immeasurable importance of the things which are at stake—your happiness, Claude, and good name, the welfare of my mother and sisters, the honor of our hitherto untarnished name! Think of these things, I implore you, and for the sake of the glamour which this worthless woman has cast over you do not forget that she is shameless—polluted—that she—"

But the strain was too much upon Claude, the simulated calm gave way, his eyes blazed as he waved an unsteady hand towards the door, his lips shook.

"Go—will you?" he burst out hoarsely. "Go—preacher!"

It was not an opprobrious term which he had been called, Cecil decided as he was driven to the station—one, rather, of which he should have been proud. Yet as he recalled it he felt for the moment as if his brother had hurled an insult in his face; ignominiously he had obeyed him in spite of himself, and had silently crept away. Cecil was by no means easy in his mind or pleased. His brother's good opinion had during all their lives been of greatest value to him, and here was Claude taking things in this unexpected and uncomfortable way. Cecil told himself that he had been long enough in the Church, and spending himself for the good of others, to have given up expecting gratitude from the world in which he labored—yet this only brother! He felt, of course, the satisfaction arising from the consciousness of a disagreeable duty valiantly performed, yet he could not be quite happy in his mind; he could not but acknowledge to himself that he had been badly used.

However, on his arrival home all such thoughts were driven out of his head effectually and for some time to come.

He found the Rectory in a state of commotion, doors opening and shutting, lights flitting from one room to another, a sound of frightened, whispering voices on stairs and landing. In the library, firmly established in his own arm-chair, he found his hated mother-in-law whom, with much pains he had kept, hitherto, from getting

a footing in his house. His wife was said by her to be dying upstairs.

The night of agony he passed in company with Lally's undesirable parent Cecil will remember to his dying day. That happy-go-lucky temper of hers which he so much condemned had forsaken her on this occasion, or only visited her by fits and starts. Occasionally she escaped from the anxious theme of the hour, and conversationally ambled on in her accustomed way, telling appropriate anecdotes of her own experiences and those of other people, which might by chance be founded in fact, but were quite as likely, Cecil knew, to be purely fictitious; but more often she let her newly-awakened maternal anxieties overwhelm her. She clung to Cecil's shrinking form, and would not be cast off; she wept, she howled.

"Mrs. Burne, you will drive me mad," he said to her. "Why are you here? Why, since you are here, are you not with your daughter? You might be of use there. She is alone with strangers—will you go up to her?"

No. Mrs. Burne would not. She refused with much vehemence of language. Cecil was a heartless wretch—no one but a heartless wretch would expect a mother to look on while her child died. Emphatically she would not.

She flung herself upon Lally's sofa till it creaked with the strain, and she entered upon a fresh burst of sobbing so noisy that the Rector was in an agony lest the sound should reach his wife. He went to her, and with his slight hand nervously grasping her shoulder, he shook her great frame.

"Be silent!" he commanded, in a frenzy of anger and fear. "At least you can be silent!"

But at that moment to be silent was the impossible thing. Now that she had thoroughly given way to her feelings, she would not be balked of her howl.

With his hands to his distracted head, Cecil rushed upstairs to ascertain if those dismal sounds could reach his wife. The doctor came out to him upon the landing.

"Keep her mother away from her by any means," he said. She is asking for her sister. Miss Burne is a sensible girl, get her here at once."

Down went the poor young husband, shaking in every limb. As he opened the library door his mother-in-law, waiting behind it, sprang upon his neck—the shock of the contact nearly bore him to the ground—with the shrieking question, was she dead? Oh, had he

come to tell her her little Lally was dead? Oh, if he had, don't let him open his lips to say the dreadful word—let him be dumb for ever and ever rather than murder that sweet pretty one's wretched mother by that cruel news.

"Come with me," Cecil said, severely, through his chattering teeth.

He picked up her bonnet from the table where she had cast it down and flung it upon her head. He almost dragged her to the stable door where his horse was being harnessed to the dog-cart. "The doctor says you must be got home at once," he said. "He fears that you also should be ill."

Afterwards he repented very bitterly of that untruth, confessed it with humility in his prayers, and with solemnity to Mrs. Burne, who laughed at him for his pains.

The good lady recovered her equanimity directly she was out of the house, had a great deal of talk with the groom during the drive homeward, discoursing with him freely on matters connected with his master's household, and giving him a good deal of information about the stars shining above their heads, on which subject she considered herself especially knowing.

Before Mary Burne, in answer to the urgent message sent for her, could reach the Rectory, the Rector's child was born.

Poor Cecil's rejoicing over this intelligence was, however, doomed to be of short duration, for Lally was very ill. For several days and nights, Mary, hardly closing her eyes, sat by her sister's bedside, Lally clinging to her hand, and mutely refusing to let her out of her sight. So strong and full of vitality Mary seemed, and the other girl so weak and sinking and dependent on her sister, it almost appeared to the terrified husband that should the one be withdrawn, the other must perish for want of the sustaining hand. Often and often during that terrible period of suspense when the patient, only half-conscious, lay with her faint, lovely head turned to her sister, her half-closed eyes upon her face, Cecil's own eyes, full of tears, would turn from the little exhausted form to Mary's watchful, composed face with a despairing appeal to her to rekindle his dying hope, to give him also strength to wait and watch for the doubtful issue of the dreadful struggle between life and death.

And Mary never failed him. Her eyes would flash confidence into his, the brilliance of her smile would warm his heart, so sick and cold.

"She will live—she will live!" she said to him, by word of mouth when speech was possible, by every line of her splendid form and face, by the grasp of her steady, firm hand when language was de-

nied. For Mary possessed in beautiful perfection the courage which is patience, the bravery which is self-command.

And during this time of his leaning upon her all that was to Mary's discredit was blotted out of the Rector's mind; he forgot that he had always read her through and through, and entirely disapproved of her. All that half-veiled, and at length open enmity between them—his deep displeasures with her, her careless contempt of him—became as though it had never been. One common hope, one awful fear shared between them through a couple of interminable days, through two weary unending nights, made a bond between them, created a memory which, whatever the future might bring, could never be broken or lost.

They seemed to have lived an age by that bedside, when at length the hour came in which Lally was declared to be out of danger. Then the doctor, in whose breast a great admiration for the handsome, patient nurse had arisen, gave Mary orders, so strict that she dared not disobey, to go home and get twelve hours' rest before she resumed her place. And Mary, now that the strain was removed, felt how tired out she was, acknowledged the stiffness of her limbs and the dry aching of her eyes, and failed to respond to that appealing glance of Lally which besought her to stay still.

When she went into the sick-room with her hat on to say good-bye, and leaned over the bed to kiss the tiny new nephew who lay in his dreamless sleep by his girl-mother's side, she suddenly felt Lally's weak arms about her neck, and heard Lally's weak and tremulous whispers in her ear.

"Mary—I've sent away nurse and Cecil—I want to speak to you." But there she broke down, and began weakly to sigh and to cry and to gasp for breath, and to frighten Mary.

"What is it Lal?" she said, cheerfully. "Dear, there is not in the whole world a thing for you to distress yourself about. Come, tell me what is the matter, as quietly as you can."

"You are so good—so good to me, Mamie. I should have died if you hadn't been so good!"

"Nonsense! Pure nonsense! You were always worth a dozen dead ones—"

"Cecil says so. He said I was to thank you. He said that under God you had saved me to him and to baby. Oh, Mamie—if I had died—!"

A pause during which the weak, gasping weeping threatened to turn into hysterical sobs, then the tremulous whisper again,

"You wouldn't have told, would you? All the time you sat there I wanted you to say you wouldn't tell—oh, I did want you so badly to say it—you wouldn't tell if I died—about the story I told Cecil."

"Hush! Be quiet, Lal; the nurse or Cecil will hear. Of course I shall not tell."

"If he knew I should die. I would die—I would kill myself and my baby—I would. I've warned you, Mary—you won't tell Cecil—promise?"

"I promise." In spite of herself her voice was a little cold; for Lally was a coward, and Mary was constituted so that she could not but despise cowards.

Lally noticed the change of tone.

"I know you hate me," she wept. "You are disgusted with me, and you hate me. But I don't care. I don't care who hates me so that Cecil does not know; I don't care who despises me so he doesn't. Mary, are you going to promise—are you? or do you want baby and me to die?"

"Have I not promised you?" Mary said. "You know if I break my promises. Be quite happy, Lally. Cecil will never know through me."

Then she went her way, and the cold air of spring revived her wearied body, and the tender blue of the sky and the young verdure of the banks and hedge-ways refreshed her aching eyes. But her mind was not altogether at peace. Those words of Lally's had recalled an unpleasantness all but forgotten. She told herself again, but with less confidence than of old, that what Cecil chose to think of her was a matter of no moment. Her soul and Cecil's had been too close to each other in the last few days for her to know without pain that for all her life he must misunderstand and despise her.

Yet even now it was not of Cecil she thought, but of Claude. She had prevented his brother speaking to him on the subject—had lied to prevent it. Yet was it not possible the tale should reach him? If Cecil had heard it, why not he? And if he heard—heard with her not at hand to deny the story, how would he be affected?

She lifted her head with proud confidence and looked up, with eyes suddenly wet with tears, to the blue sky shining through the budding trees.

"Ah, Claude would not believe!" she said. "He would not believe such a story of me!"

Reaching home she made inquiries for letters that had come in her

absence, and found only one—one in Claude's handwriting, and this she took to her room with her to read before she slept.

"They might have sent it to me," she said, when, examining the post-mark, she found it had arrived the day before. "Mona—some of them, might have had the thought."

For even in those dark days that were passed she had missed and longed for his letters. A word of tenderness, of encouragement from him would have been a support indeed to Mary through that silence and fear.

She had forgotten her stiffness and her fatigue now, and flinging her hat and gloves and cloak from her, and sitting down on the side of the bed, she tore open the precious letter. She saw that it was unusually short—for Claude had a woman's taste for letter-writing, and was wont to fill his four pages regularly for Mary; saw also her own name standing lonely on its separate line, supported by none of the endearing epithets which had made her own name so sweet. She grasped the paper tighter, and her heart stood still and her eyes swam as she noted that forlorn inscription, "Mary."

"In your last letter to me you made an offer (for the making of which I now believe you to have had the best reason) to release me from the engagement entered into by us. The only course open to me under the circumstances is to accept this offer. I sincerely hope that in this severing of the ties between us you are spared the pain which I confess I feel.

CLAUDE GARNETT."

It was so the letter ran.

CHAPTER XXII

BOB SEEKS HIS FORTUNE

WHEN Bob Burton said good-bye to Ashfields and set out to begin the world anew, it was with a scant wardrobe, an almost empty pocket, and no very high hopes. The widow of his mother's brother, another member of the family upon whom fortune had not smiled, kept a lodging-house in Camdentown. To her Bob in his friendlessness turned, and from her he received that kind of frigid welcome and that grudging hospitality which is the portion of the poor relation.

From that unloved and unlovely asylum at Camdentown did Bob for many weeks tramp daily to the city; and all day long he sought employment in that crowded hive. Nowhere, amid the swarming toilers, could room be found for Bob. He would have worked with the will and strength and endurance of a dozen of the busy, pale-faced throng in shiny black coats and much ironed "toppers," who shoved him off the pavement as he pursued his bootless quest. Yet, although he had been fairly educated, wrote a good hand, and slaved away patiently night after night to perfect himself in book-keeping, he did not stand a chance among the countless applicants of experience and of conventional type who blocked the door of office or warehouse or shop where there was a vacant post. His country-made clothes, his stout boots, his big, broad hands, huge shoulders, strong neck, and sturdy frame, all of these spoke against Bob before he had the chance to open his mouth.

Stronger than the desire to earn a livelihood was the desire to labor. The hunger for work was upon this son of the fields. He stood at street corners with his hands in his pockets, sadness in every line of his face, something like despair in his eyes, and envied—not the rich in their carriages, not the idle who dawdled at shop windows, not the sight-seers up from the country in their best clothes and with money in their pockets—but the workers—the men who took down and put up shutters, who cleaned the shop windows, who drove the cabs and busses, who passed him quickly with a basket of tools; even the boys who went on errands, even

the shoeblacks, he envied—not the crossing sweepers. Their existence depended on charity. The young man, watching those nimble gentry running after foot-passengers, and abjectly touching their hats, decided that they were in a worse case than himself. Bob would have died of hunger sooner than owe his life to charity.

And as time went on it appeared to him that if he stayed in London, to die of hunger would be his fate. There was no hope for him there. The fact that his clothes grew old, that his stalwart frame lost its flesh, his broad hands and face their bronze, did not help him by any means. That his money might hold out, he went without necessary food, he gave up his pipe, he drank no beer. Still he tramped and tramped about, always hopeless now, and for the greater part of the day—when once he had visited with his usual luck the addresses of people who had advertised any sort of employment—aimless. For the want of the use of that organ he ran a chance of becoming voiceless, too. Sometimes for a whole day he did not open his lips to a creature. It became at length an effort to do so. At night, when he returned to the lodging-house at Camdentown, his taciturnity irritated his aunt, questioning him about the fortunes of the day—fortunes which had been ill enough to bear, but were unbearable to speak upon.

So that at last he fancied with a great bitterness of heart that she had grown sceptical of his efforts to find work, of his power to make his way in the world, and weary of lending him the shelter of her roof. And so one morning, when her back was turned, he slipped the small remainder of the few pounds which had been his into the key-basket that stood upon her table in the dingy underground sitting-room, and without a word of farewell he left the melancholy retreat.

As he walked away on that last morning he said to himself that now he had burned his ships, and that, the necessity being upon him to live and not to die, employment of some sort he must get before he could shelter from the night. Whatever offered he must take, were it to scrape the roads or to walk in the ranks of the sandwich men.

But in his lonely, silent life there he had learned very little of the ways of London, and he did not know how to set about the obtaining of even those employments. And now that he had no home to go to, he began to be conscious how footsore and weary he was. His food for some time had been insufficient, and on this last day he had obtained none whatever. He had always pitied the poor

wretches whom he had seen sleeping in the daytime on benches in park and square; he took it as a confession that they had given up even looking for what was the only thing which could make life worth living—work. Yet now so suddenly weary was he that, having wandered into Leicester Square, he sat down there in the corner of an iron chair and gave himself up to the lethargy of despair.

It was not spring yet, but the air was damp and close and enervating. Where was the use of striving against Fate? If one struggled, or if one sank like a log, the waters of affliction closed over—one drowned in either case. What did it matter? Who was there to care? He sat lumpishly in his corner and closed his eyes.

Then a particularly dirty flower-girl, with a smallpox-pitted most unflower-like face, came and seated herself beside him, and began to rearrange the bunches of violets and narcissus in her basket.

Now Bob had labored among the flowers in the Ashfields garden till he had a knowledge of them and a love of them unusual in young men of his condition. And because that labor had been with an eye to pleasing Mary, it was Mary's face that was wont to flash upon his gaze when his eyes rested on the flowers he had reared for her pleasure.

He was not happy enough—if one may be permitted the inaccuracy—to be any longer wretched about the young woman who had thrown him overboard. In an otherwise untroubled existence the misery arising from an unhappy love affair, even in this age of infidelity, in these times of hurry, of bustle, and of change, may be dragged out to a quite respectable length, and in supreme moments the name of the loved one be the first to fly to the lips; but in such weary days as Bob had known, in such a strait as he found himself at present, love troubles are apt to find their proper place. The fact establishes itself that a man can live without a sight of his sweetheart's face when he can't possibly live without food. And so it had come to this that there were long, long hours in the day in looking back on which Bob admitted that he had not thought of Mary at all. The discovery did not lend him any elation; he had no desire to be cured of his love for her; the fact that he thought of her less was a sign of the desperation of his present condition—that was all.

Yet he thought of her now as he looked at the flowers. He shut his listless eyes, and breathed their fragrance, and thought of her still.

"Fresh vi'lets, sir, honly a penny," said the hoarse-voiced dirty-faced flower-girl as she fixed the bunches in her basket. "Honly a penny, and tride's horful slow!"

"My good girl," Bob said to her, slowly, "I have not a penny in the world." He opened his eyes and looked again at the dark blue of the violets and the cream of the fair narcissi—and then he fell asleep and dreamed of Ashfields and of Mary, of youth and prosperity, and freedom from care, and love!—a dream of impossible sweetness and beauty.

He had spared no glance for the unattractive flower-girl with the pinched white face of scars and the tattered, sloven shawl; but the flower-girl, with a side glance from her fragrant wares, looked at him—at the big, wiry frame, at the droop and the hopelessness of the broad figure made for activity and strength.

"'Is 'at's good, and 'is boots is good, and 'is 'ands is clean," the girl said to herself as she bound the wire deftly about her sweet stock in trade. "'E don't look loike the booze, and 'e don't look loike bein' 'ard-up; what the blazes is it as 'as come over 'im, now!"

Bob slept on, and presently a smile crept round his lips. For on that mossy bank in the park meadow where he was sitting at her side, the young lambs bleating around them, the breath of violets heavy in the air, Mary had suddenly leaned towards him and kissed him on the lips. How sweet was the fragrance of her breath! Then the hands clasped upon his breast closed a little tighter, for Mary's hand was locked in his.

And long after the hoarse-voiced flower-girl had gone off to her corner in the Strand, to her coarse jokes with ladies of her own profession, to her pestering of wayfarers, her cry of "sweet vi'lets," and her pathetic assurances that "tride was horful slow," Bob Burton slept on—slept even for hours, passing from that dream of home and Mary into a deathful blank, but awaking at last with her name upon his lips—for was not her hand still lying in his?

Poor Bob! Only a bunch of vi'lets touched against your lips and placed in your sleeping grasp by the pitying, dirty, blessed hand of a woman as poor and as friendless as yourself!

The clock of St. Martin-in-the-Fields was chiming four o'clock when Bob awoke, and looked with astonished eyes at the flowers in his hands. Had Mary, tired of waiting for him to wake, left the flowers as a sign that she would return to him? It was some time before he remembered where he was and how he had fallen asleep, before he understood that it must have been the filthy flower-girl who had been the ministering angel to refresh him with that heavenly dream.

Dazedly he held the flowers to his face. Although he had been

so much in love no woman had taught him sentiment, in all his life he had not kissed a flower; but he kissed those that the stranger girl had given him. In all the weary weeks—his moroseness and sullen reserve being probably alone to blame—that had been the first kindness he had received! He thought to himself that he would like to find that girl and thank her. He got up and turned his feet from the Square, and walked along Charing Cross and the Strand and into Fleet Street and back again to Trafalgar Square, and many faces of flower-girls he looked into, but saw not the one he sought. Let us hope that "tride" had prospered at last, and that the ministering angel had gone home.

She was lost to Bob, at any rate, and after an hour's fruitless search that strange new apathy came over him again. Presently he stopped on the wrong side of the Strand and looked for long in a picture-dealer's window. There, among far more striking and important works, was a small painting of a fresh-ploughed field; a flock of gulls wheeling beneath a dull gray sky; some had settled, some were settling upon the moist-looking upturned soil—a most homely, unambitious little picture, but one that appealed as none other could have done to the heart of the homesick, exiled countryman. In the slouching figure plodding into the distance beside his plough it was easy to fancy a resemblance to any one of the dozen slouching figures who had tilled the home-fields. The horses—so small they were vanishing in perspective—he knew them well!—Bell and Bonny—and unequal-looking, ill-matched pair, who yet worked best together. The field was the Widow's Croft—Bob recognized it at once. He and his father were standing just beyond the straggling hedge, of which one saw a portion on the left hand of the picture, looking critically at the furrows—it was a pity one could not peep behind and see them there.

When the poor young fellow turned at last from the contemplation of that picture it by no means ceased to affect his hazy consciousness. He no longer walked on London pavements, nor heard the confused rumble underlying the sharp, jarring noises of the streets; he had ceased even to stand behind the thorn-hedge and listen to his father's comments on the way Dan Crook had "set the field out." He was trudging behind the plough; the scent of the fresh-turned sod was in his nostrils; his ears were filled with homely, familiar sounds; the loud caw of the old rook, set as sentinel in the corner tree; the incessant chirping of the finches in the hedges; the *slow switching* of the mare's ragged tail.

So, in a waking dream, Bob went upon his way, heavy and foot-sore, and did not stop until he found he had walked into a small crowd of people who had collected round a gentleman who had backed a horse and vehicle onto the pavement to the danger of passers-by, and a policeman who was expostulating with the said gentleman for his conduct.

"Look hout! Where hare you a-comin' to?" an indignant spectator, over whom Bob had tried to guide his plough, demanded in a naturally aggrieved voice. "I 'int quite so small but what you can see me, I s'pose, or pre'aps you're a bloomin' sonnambular."

"I beg your pardon," Bob said. He looked around with eyes that only indistinctly saw what was actually around him still.

The gentleman who held the reins was good-naturedly swearing, much to the amusement of the crowd, at the expostulating policeman; the groom who had sprung to the horses' heads was openly chuckling.

"You'd best get in beside your master and take the reins," the policeman said to him.

Whereat the master in question waxed furiously indignant: "Was he to be driven through the streets like an infernal saw-bones?" he demanded of the policeman. He was as sober as a judge, and could drive his horses against any man in England.

At the sound of the husky, loud voice Bob grew fully awake. His heart began to thump with excitement. He was as delighted to see Spilling's inebriated, good-humored countenance as if it had been the most intellectual and refined physiognomy the world held. He pushed through the crowd that he might get a nearer view. Curiously enough the idea of calling the half-tipsy man's attention to himself did not enter Bob's muddled head. Spilling was a part of the past, and from all the past Bob was cut off irretrievably. Nor, to say the truth, was Mr. Herbert just then in any condition to recognize his friends.

But, as fate would have it, the eyes of Charles the groom fell upon the broad-shouldered young man as he elbowed his way through the crowd—and luck had changed for Bob Burton!

"Beg pardon, sir," the man said, eagerly touching his hat. "Get up beside the gov'nor, sir, and take the reins. This is the second time we've all but come to grief, and it 'on't be the last time, nayther. Mr. Burton, sir; from Gaythorpe," he called to his master.

And the tipsy smile died off Mr. Spilling's face, the only half-coherent curses from his lips, a gleam of pleasure showed itself in his

clouded eyes, and in another half-minute Bob, the footsore wanderer of the pitiless streets, found himself driving a pair of almost priceless horses through the London streets, found himself with a friend worth his many thousands a year at his side, with Charles the groom (enjoying for the first time that day a pleasing sense of personal security) at his back.

It was in the middle of that night that Mr. Spilling was seized with that bad attack of delirium tremens, in which he all but lost his worthless life, and through which Bob nursed him. From that illness he emerged slowly, in a thoroughly depressed and shaken condition. The doctor, deeming it well to frighten him out of his evil habit, made no secret of the danger through which he had passed, and of his present unsatisfactory state.

"Another attack will finish you," he said, "and a bad bout of drinking will inevitably result in another attack."

But Spilling, alarmed as he was, was not then in a condition of body entirely to give up drink, nor had he sufficient strength of mind to make of himself a moderate drinker. With irresistible entreaty he implored Burton not to leave him—to save him, if possible, from the demon who was urging him on to destruction.

"Keep me from it—from the d—d stuff," he implored Bob, actually sobbing out the words in his distress and weakness. "If you have to knock me down, or blow my brains out, keep me from it."

So, through the rest of that winter and for months to come Bob lay in the lap of luxury; nor need have known another care for the day or thought for the morrow if he had been of those that sit contented at other men's hearths. Unfortunately for him he was one to find "his food salt who fares upon another's bread"—to feel "how steep his path who treadeth up and down another's stairs." And in that life of indolence and care, with its occasional bouts of gayety and excitement, he ate out his own heart in bitterness of spirit.

The poor broken-down old farmer's son was too proud a man for the post, too simple to appease his fear of the bugbear "charity" by the fact that he earned his bread by duties which were distasteful. His work was not well enough defined for Bob's practical mind. To drive at Spilling's side, to dine at his table, to keep him sober through periods when the man would have sold his soul for drink—these were not all of them agreeable duties, but they were not of the kind which Bob called work.

Again and again he tried to get away, but Spilling, who, since

his illness was very emotional and at times hysterical, would cling to him, would shed tears, and prevail on him to stay. So from month to month he stayed on, saying to himself that each week should be the last.

The movements of Herbert Spilling were always erratic. He liked to say of himself that he never knew in the morning where the devil would lead him ere night. One day he found himself led back to Midborough. It was the effort to escape from the dulness of the country, perhaps, which resulted in that last, worst drinking bout, which Burton was powerless to prevent. The account of this outbreak provided food for gossip for good Mrs. Barkaway and all the neighboring old ladies; and from its effects the wretched owner of many worse than useless thousands was destined never to recover.

CHAPTER XXIII

"LET CECIL DO HIS WORST!"

THE effect that a few nights' loss of rest had upon the fine and healthy form of Mary Burne was noticed with some surprise by the doctor, who had known her all her life as a member of a highly unsatisfactory family who always threw away their medicine and never paid their doctor's bills.

"After all, that girl has less physical endurance than I thought," he said to himself, looking across at her after having examined the, to him, far less interesting patient upon the bed. "You didn't obey orders, young lady," he said to her. "I thought I told you to go home and to go to bed."

"And I went home, and I went to bed," Mary said, smiling at him.

"Oh, but," put in Lally's faint voice, "you couldn't have slept long, Mamie, because you were back here at my bedside at day-break."

"Well, where is the good of bed if you can't sleep?"

"Not sleep? At your age?" the doctor said, "and after a couple of nights' watching?" He came round the bed and took her hand and laid a finger upon her pulse. "I shall have to prescribe for you next," he threatened her.

But Mary pulled away her wrist. "You know what becomes of the physic you send to me," she said, laughing in his face.

What medicine was there to heal a broken heart? Mary asked herself in bitter self-derision when he was gone. Broken? Mary Burne with a broken heart? She was not the woman to give way to that kind of puling sentiment. Her heart was whole enough—only sick and sorry and disgusted for the moment.

The shock had been so great! In the first few minutes after reading Claude Garnett's letter she had said to herself that it was a joke—to try her—that he could not mean it. He himself would follow upon his letter quickly; then a word, a look, would end the cruel farce. It was this blessed incredulity which made the intolerable tolerable *just at first*. When her mind was compelled to acknowledge the

gravity and the reality of the situation, her heart cried that it would not submit. She must write to him, must go to him, must put before him that which he was doing in such a light that he would not dare to persist, he would not dare to throw away such happiness.

For had they not been happy? Oh, those long, fresh morning hours, those afternoons of idleness and of sunshine, those evenings in the sweet warm dusk! If in those, for them, had not been happiness, where was it to be found?

She would say to him, "Look—happy? If you are not happy with me, what are you, then? Say there is much to displease you, much you would have had otherwise; say your faith in me has been shaken and you cannot forget; say you are troubled by many fears; say, even, I jar upon you at times, fret you, harass you; say it is unrest and not peace I have brought you—yet say, oh, say is it not sweet? Think over what has been between us, and remember this—and this—and this!"

But presently reflection came, and the recollection of that other time when he had—how easily!—cast her off. Was it possible that even then he was glad to be free? And she? What had she done? She had gone to him with tears, with out-stretched hands, with entreaty—she—Mary Burne! Entreating for herself! Had that been she? And should she humble herself again, and to the same man? Never!

It was at that point she had flown from her sleepless bed, and with shaking hands had thrown on again her hat and cloak. Never! Never! She set her teeth and sallied forth in the gray dawn to her sister's house. And as she walked bitter anger against him for that meanness of catching at the feeble pretext supplied by her letter, and cruel self-scorn for all those months, during which, in a fool's paradise, she had held him captive who was longing to be free, filled her heart and kept her company. And although anger and scorn are not pleasant inmates of the breast, they are at least a defence against selfish sorrow and self-pity.

And so Mary held up her head with a good courage, and was enabled to show a brave face to the world. Although she would not take the doctor's medicine, he made her take his advice, and drove her forth for long walks in the cold spring air. And, even if at times she loathed food, she forced herself to eat, because she would not allow that anything was different with her; and if her sleep at night was not sound, she was careful not to mention the fact. So that it was only the doctor who noticed that her eyes were duller,

and that black circles, never seen there before, had formed themselves beneath, that her hand was cold to the touch, that something of its old ring of joyous vitality was lost from her voice.

Meanwhile as his anxiety for his wife became less, the thoughts of the Rector of Gaythorpe reverted to the theme which had engrossed them before the birth of his child. Being particularly bigoted and narrow-minded, he felt justified in priding himself on being a consistent man; he was hardly ever tortured by indecision, and having once come to a conclusion was very seldom troubled to rearrange his thoughts. Yet he found it impossible to look upon Mary, his comforter and stronghold in the darkest hour of his life, his wife's most patient and devoted nurse, with the same eyes which had been used to behold her.

"Because I have grown to love the sinner, the sin must be no less hateful," he said, preaching dictatorially to himself as he would have done to another in his case, always secure in his own infallibility. It was impossible that he could err in judgment. Regret and remorse were terms which he associated entirely with other people, and of which he had no personal experience. He had hitherto delayed to tell Mary of his interview with Claude, not from any shame or misgiving as to what he had done, not even from expediency and a fear of disturbing Mary at his wife's bedside, but because of the engrossing nature of their anxiety for Lally, which, in their short interviews, had successfully precluded every other subject of conversation.

However, faithful to his idea of his duty, occasion presenting itself at length, he began.

Coming in from her walk and finding Lally happily asleep, Mary one morning had looked into the library to notify to Cecil the fact that she was going to walk in the garden till such time as she was wanted up-stairs. The Rector was in the act of writing a letter; he lifted his head and asked Mary to stop with him for a few minutes.

"I have not yet thanked you for all your kind care of my dear wife," he said, not glancing at her, but industriously dotting the "i's" and crossing the "t's," and looking to the punctuation of the letter before him. "Do not think because I have not spoken of it that I am insensible to your goodness, or have forgotten, or shall ever forget."

Mary raised her fine, straight brows. "Goodness?" she repeated. "*Not much* goodness in anxiety for one's sister, I think."

"It was natural, perhaps, that you should have done what you have, and you have done it naturally. I am not the less conscious of the benefits we have received, nor am I the less grateful. But you will not expect me, Mary, to let a personal feeling interfere with my duty. I am sure that your good sense will not allow you to expect that? I think that I should be a despicable character if I could let personal considerations interfere—and I have not done so. Mary, I have thought it my duty to speak to my brother about that unhappy episode with which you yourself had acquainted him—and I have fulfilled my duty."

"You have?" Mary said. She did not seem to be very greatly moved. What did it or anything signify now? "You might have saved yourself the trouble, then. Claude is no longer interested in my affairs. Our engagement has been, for some time, at an end." For some time? Mary could not have told for how long, whether days or weeks or months. The rupture to her was so new that the agony of it was still fresh in her mind—was so old that she was weary and bowed down with the burden of it. This was the first intimation of the fact she had brought herself to give. Whom did it concern but herself? Who would care? Who had the right to be interested?

A flush of satisfaction came to Cecil's pale cheeks. Mary might be as an angel of goodness in a sick-house, but she was by no means the wife for Claude!

"Indeed!" he said, lifting his eyes, in which she saw the gratification twinkling, to her face. "I wonder Claude did not himself tell me."

"Perhaps he did not think it worth mentioning," Mary said, with a careless shrug of the shoulders; "but that is the fact, nevertheless."

Cecil looked at her, in spite of his gladness, with some offence; the losing of Claude Garnett for a husband should have been of more moment to any woman than that!

"I can but think you have both decided wisely," he said; "an ill-assorted marriage is a grievous, even a sinful mistake."

"Then there will be one grievous and sinful mistake the less in the world," she said. With that she walked to the door, but paused there and looked over her shoulder at him. "It's a pity, things being as they are, that you should have given your brother the history of the family scandal," she said. "Claude has nothing to do with it, you see, and you—being connected with us—have."

"Mary!" he said, speaking her name with some emotion, a protest against the light scorn of him he read in her voice, "if it had not been my duty, do you not believe that I would have preferred to remain silent forever? And, Mary, let me say this much, since I have seen this better side of you—seen you so womanly, so helpful, so noble in your self-forgetfulness at my dear wife's bedside—since this, the sorrow which I felt on hearing that miserable story is redoubled—is magnified a hundred-fold—my sorrow, Mary, and my surprise. And I have even thought—the act of course must remain the same and all its grievous consequences—but I have thought that some extenuating circumstance there must be, something which, if I only knew it, if you would confide in me, would place your mad folly and wickedness in another light—a light, Mary, which I would faithfully represent to Claude. Say, is it not so?"

She stopped for a minute with her back still turned to him before she answered. Then: "Well, since you ask me, it is so," she said, slowly. "I'm not going to turn you into my father-confessor. I don't feel called on, at present, to confide in any one; but this much I will say, that if you knew the whole story as it occurred I don't think even you would blame me much."

She left the room, and the Rector, sitting for some time lost in thought, presently wrote off a letter to his brother, in which he told him of Lally's progress to recovery and of Mary Burne's devotion to her.

"I am the more glad to testify to her devotion and kindness," he concluded, "because I confess that they were a revelation and a surprise to me, and because I have not conscientiously been able hitherto to speak of her to you in any but condemnatory tones. I have this moment received her assurances that in that shameful affair of which we spoke there are extenuating circumstances. She will not be induced to speak openly, but she has said that if we knew the whole history we should not so greatly blame her. I am of opinion that greater comprehension of motive, of circumstance, of coincidence, would place many a sinner before the world in a different light, the sin being at the same time no less hateful. And so let us be careful of judging, Claude.

"I have felt compelled to write these few words to you on this subject, painful to both. I felt it my duty to do justice to this unhappy girl who, if she be no longer your affianced wife, is still my sister-in-law."

And Mary paced the straight, short walks of the Rectory garden

with a heart both angry and bitter. So Claude also was to hear this precious lie told about her! It was in vain that she asked herself contemptuously what that could matter. When she had given that foolish promise to quiet Lally she certainly had not intended to sacrifice herself so far as this. She had always made a mental reservation to the effect that should the story reach Claude she would at once tell the truth to him at any cost. What was the smug content of that pharisee in the library—what was even Lally's peace of mind compared with the horror of Claude's believing, if only for an hour, such an ugly thing as that!

And she had taken precautions. By that lie which she had unhesitatingly told she had guarded against the chance of Cecil's divulging the tale. Should it leak out from other quarters she had implored her lover, in that letter he had so meanly used against her, to suspend his judgment until she could speak.

But now—what did it matter? Let Cecil do his worst!

She had not understood that the matter had been revealed already to Claude, but had in some way conceived the notion that the envelope which lay directed to his brother at Cecil's elbow, as he added his commas and colons to the paper before him, was destined to hold the unpleasant narration. A short time ago she would have fondly believed that such a revelation concerning her would be worse than death itself to Claude. A rude awaking had come. What did anything matter now?

When, grown tired of her bitter thoughts, of the loneliness and dreariness of the Rectory garden, she went in-doors, her eye was caught by the letter-bag lying on the hall-table, ready locked for post. Slowly she walked past it, and as she mounted the stairs she turned her head over her shoulder looking at it still. Slowly and more slowly she made the ascent, and when she reached her sister's door hesitated, not entering. All at once she turned and with burning cheek flew down-stairs, fetched the key from Lally's little basket, unlocked the bag, and, eager-eyed, looked through the letters. Yes—there it was, the letter that carried the story of her disgrace! It should not go. However indifferent he was, however weary of her, however glad to be free, he should not believe that lie of her. Never! never!

She held the letter in her hand and looked at name and address in Cecil's precise, neat hand. Oh, the cruelty of these good people! The cruelty, the blindness, the evil-mindedness! That he could write to his brother of any woman such a tale as that! That he

could not have the wit to see that such a thing told of her—Mary Burne—must be the blackest of lies!

She put her fingers in position to tear the envelope across—and then her impulse changed, her pride came back to her, and her hands fell. What was it to her any longer? And to him it would be nothing. If one man liked to lie about her and another had the heart to believe, why, let each have his will. With a gesture of disgust she tossed the letter into the bag and moved away.

At the library door stood the Rector, who had watched her proceedings, unseen till then, with speechless horror. She looked him, quite unembarrassed, in the face.

"I was intending to destroy your letter to your brother," she said. "It contains an untruth, and I meant to destroy it. I have, however, thought better of it—for what does it matter to me?"

He was too much astonished at her daring to think of a reply until she had remounted the stairs and was out of hearing. Then he went back to his study and his sermon-paper much disturbed and wondering in his mind. A woman who could trifle with a letter-bag, who could contemplate the destruction of other people's letters! A woman who would stick at nothing!

"A dangerous—dangerous woman!" said the poor Rector, thinking uneasily of innocent little Lally, helpless in such hands.

CHAPTER XXIV

"SAY ONLY GOOD-BYE"

IN the mean time that story which Mrs. Barkaway had told so confidentially to Olivia Garnett she told in equal confidence to various other people. The Burnes being the people chiefly concerned were the last to hear the rumor. But at length one of Mona's friends, a daughter of that doctor whose unsatisfactory patients the Hall people were, and with whom and with whose brother she was used to exhibit her prowess at cricket, repeated something of the tale to Mona.

"Of course it isn't true," this girl said, being far from sure the while that it wasn't; "but it's what people are saying. And mother's so afraid father should hear it—he would never let me go to your house for tennis if he did, mother says. Father is so particular. He'd sooner we were dead than talked about."

Mona in a heat and a rage flew home to Mary.

"This will be a nice thing!" she cried; "I shan't get my tennis now. And it was the *only* thing! Algy Hopson is splendid practice, too. There isn't another girl anywhere who can take his balls except me—he says so himself. And all because of that horrid Spilling having been in love with you and telling stupid stories. I don't know what they are—Geraldine Hopson said she didn't know either or she would have told me."

"And did Geraldine say it was about me that these stories were told?"

"She mightn't have mentioned your name. She didn't positively say '*Mary*'—but I knew it was you, because Spilling wasn't even in love with Lally. It's a pity Spilling can't be *killed* for making mischief!" Mona cried, with a vicious showing of her teeth. "It's a nice look on for me if it comes to Dr. Hopson's ears."

"It was a nice look on anyhow!" Mary thought. She was not greatly exercised anent the crisis in Mona's tennis arrangements, but she saw quite well that the secret so vital to poor, still-ailing, little Mrs. Garnett's happiness was in danger of escaping.

Herbert Spilling, on one lovely afternoon in June, was lying upon

a couch drawn up to the large window which opened upon the trim and beautiful flower-garden of The Cedars. The master of the house was uneasily dozing. He had taken the fancy to have himself dressed in the yachting suit which had been made for him that summer but never put to its legitimate use; and over his legs and feet, which were swelled with dropsy, a light rug was thrown. His face was puffy and yellow—he was a dreadful wreck of himself.

A few yards distant from him, upon the cushioned window-seat, sat Bob—a dejected, weary, somewhat savage-looking Bob, in whose dark cheeks the coppery tinge had given place to a lighter hue, whose face was less broad—was even a trifle haggard-looking; who sat in his seat not as if he were weary, only weary of resting there.

He had become expert in his sick-room duties; now and again he looked at the hands of the clock, travelling so slowly, to see if it were time to administer medicine or nourishment, and he turned the paper he held in his hands with the utmost care for fear of disturbing the patient's light slumbers. But he had been sitting there for ages, and the paper afforded no further distraction.

He looked out over that part of the garden upon which the window looked: a smooth-cropped, weedless lawn; a couple of splendid cedars stretching straight, solemn arms above garden-chairs on which no one now ever sat; beyond, lobelia, calceolaria, geranium—a ribbon bordering, a little too brilliant in the blaze of the sun for tired eyes; Bob's fell weariedly upon the window-ledge. A small spider, striped yellow and black, a most nimble, dapper little fellow, ran across and disappeared beneath a large pink rose-leaf lying there. After that a creature, most magnificent of aspect, came in sight, with purple, metallic-looking head and wings, and body of copper highly polished. And Bob mistrusted that, it was so beautiful; and he glanced aside to the ant dragging, with infinite labor, a dead fly about ten times its own bulk over the window-ledge. For minutes, Bob, with indifferent gaze, watched the efforts of the tiny creature until it disappeared at length over the side, lowering its burden before it, and putting the drag on its own minute limbs in a manner wonderful to behold, and then—

Then Spilling, opening dull and languid eyes, and looking over at Bob, thought that his faithful nurse and friend had fallen asleep in the heat of the still, warm air. But as he looked a change came over Bob; the large inert frame grew rigid as if in attention, the expression of the tired morose face became tense. Then a quiver of light

and color and emotion seemed to tremble over him, and Bob had started upon his feet, grasping the rustling sheet of the newspaper tightly in one strong hand.

Presently, with a couple of strides he was at the side of the couch, standing there, his eyes fixed on the door, and with an ashen face.

The invalid regarded his friend with irritation as well as with vague alarm. "What the deuce is up?" he said.

Bob's answer was given dreamily, below his breath.

"Mary's here," he said—for all the quiet of his voice there was a glitter of excitement in his eye—"Mary Burne."

"Here? Mary? Where?" Spilling said, with some feverish concern. He tried to struggle into a sitting posture; he twitched irritably at the silk covering laid over his knees.

"I heard her voice—she's in the hall—she's coming," Bob said, absently.

"My coat's crept up to the back of my head," Spilling complained. "Don't stand staring there, man! Keep that infernal thing—do!—from tumbling off my feet, and pull up this cursed cushion at the back of my head."

"You're all right, old man," Bob said, in a slow whisper; he was listening with all his ears; he moved his fingers mechanically over the rug at which Spilling was futilely tugging, but his eyes were fixed on the door.

When it opened and Mary came into the room, all she saw for a minute was Bob's strong figure, his eager eyes, his pale face. For without consciousness of movement, he had gone hurriedly forward and had met her within the door.

"Mary!" he said, beneath his breath, tightly grasping her hand.

"Is it really you?" she asked him, gently. She looked at him so sadly and without a smile, taking in the alteration in his appearance. For although the change might have been entirely for the better from another point of view, the trouble he had known having softened and refined and given character to Bob's by no means classic features, these improvements seemed sad enough in the eyes of the woman remembering so well the freshness and the vigor and the hopefulness of the, not long ago, boyish face.

And Bob, having endured the compassion of her gaze for a moment, having recalled where and what he was, having remembered that the beautiful woman he so passionately loved was the property of another man, and nothing any more to him—worse than nothing through the rest of life—dropped her hand and stepped aside,

Then Mary stood beside Spilling's couch, and, with a heart already full, took the wasted, waxen hand he held out to her.

"I wish your eyes hadn't to be offended by such a wreck as I am," he said, "but there never could be a time when I should not be glad to see you, Mary."

"You have always been kind," she said, simply; and then she looked across at the other young man. "Bob," she said, "you will wonder, and so will Mr. Spilling, that I should have secrets with him, and yet for two minutes will you let me speak to him alone? Mamma came with me in the pony-carriage—go out to mamma, Bob."

And Bob, walking as one in a dream, went. For ten minutes he stood bareheaded in the hot sun, and Mrs. Burne questioned him of poor Spilling's health, of the doctor's treatment, of whether there was truth in the report that he still drank six bottles of champagne a day. She told how Mary had insisted on bringing her out in the heat of the day with a headache when she could just as well have taken Lally or gone alone; for, as she had said to Mary, what did two young men care about an old woman to talk to? But Mary was just the same as ever. A good girl enough, but as obstinate as a pig. She supposed Bob was living on the fat of the land at The Cedars? and she was glad of it, and didn't blame him for living like a gentleman and getting all he could. She inquired as to whether he and Spilling had plenty of asparagus every day for dinner, and complained of the poor stuff which the Ashfields beds now supplied. And so on.

Of what did she talk, and what did Bob reply? He did not know. He only knew that Mary was near; that after weary months of separation he had seen her again, had heard her speak, had held her hand. That presently—after these minutes of throbbing expectation were over—that happiness, for once again in his life, was to be his!

Before he was used to the bliss of expecting her, Mary was back with him again. She brought a message from Spilling to the effect that Mrs. Burne was to go and shake hands with him once more. And so for a few minutes he and she were alone.

She seated herself in the little carriage, and he left the head of the pony, which was, as Bob was aware, much more likely to lie down and go to sleep than to run away, and went and stood at her side.

"He has been telling me what a comfort you are to him, Bob," she said, gently. He recalled afterwards how much more gentle than of yore was her manner, how much quieter her voice and graver her face. "You are happier now?" she asked him.

He shook his head dejectedly, looking down upon her hands which held the reins loosely in her lap. "I shall get away as soon as I can," he said.

"Dear Bob, don't go while he wants you. Where should you go?"

"I don't know," he said, hopelessly. "The farthest I can get—the farthest away from—this."

"The farthest from you," Mary knew that that meant, and was silent, feeling sick and sad and sorry.

Presently she leaned towards him and spoke in a low voice.

"I want to say something to you—to ask you to remember something. If you hear a certain ugly tale of me, as you may do, it will be a false tale. Do you understand?"

"I shall not hear it," he said, quietly, lifting his eyes to her face. "No one would dare to tell it to me."

"I could not bear that you, even if we never see each other again, should think evil of me, Bob."

He gave a short contemptuous laugh, speech being so difficult to him. It answered as well. She knew that whatever happened she would be the same in his heart, and he knew that she knew it.

"Something has been troubling you, I suppose, then?" he said, presently, and with an effort, turning his eyes upon her face.

"There is always trouble, isn't there?" she said, gently. "We all get our share in time. You, too, have had trouble, poor Bob."

"You're not going to tell me what it is?"

She shook her head. "Where would be the use?"

"I suppose it is something that—Garnett—has to do with?"

"We won't talk about it."

"Have you talked about it with—Garnett?"

The color had leaped to Mary's face. "All of that is over," she said. "I did not mean to tell you, but I don't want to seem to deceive you. Mr. Garnett and I are no longer anything to each other."

"Mary!"

Such a startled gladness was in the cry! His face flushed a dark crimson, his eyes flashed. He made an eager movement towards her, and then checked himself, remembering that Claude Garnett was, after all, not the only obstacle between Mary and himself; there was her disinclination and his pennilessness among other things. When he spoke it was in a tame, dispirited voice.

"All will come right between you, I suppose?" he said.

She shook her head. "Never!" she said, emphatically. "Even if

he should wish it, which he will not, I do not wish it." She set her teeth for a minute and knit her brow, looking away from him, wondering if that were true. She hardly knew—knew only that the pain of putting it into words was intolerable. She turned impatiently upon Bob. "He was sick of me; he has done with me," she said, and added quickly, seeing the light that had leaped to his face again, "and I have done with marriage forever. So, if you go away, Bob, and if you care to remember me, you may remember me as Mary Burne for ever and ever!"

"If I remember you!" he said, and his tongue was loosed at last, and the passion that had been smouldering in his clouded eyes leaped forth like a flame. "What do you suppose I shall remember when I forget you? What do I think of night and day—every moment of my life? Do you suppose that he has made any difference in *that*? or ever will? or ever will if he marries, or if he leaves you? 'Twas like that with me before you'd ever heard his name—'twill be always like that with me. Remember! I *can't* forget. There's not a scent, not a sound of that time I forget—they're always in my mind; and things that were done and said when I was a child, half asleep over the fire, and father and mother talking over my head—they're always with me! Remember! I'm sick with remembering, and with longing—with longing for you!"

His voice was husky and broken; he scarcely knew or cared what he said. The tears stood thick in Mary's eyes.

"I think a great deal about it too, Bob, now—about when I was a girl and your mother loved me. I shall never forget any more. Bob, I know that I behaved abominably. Have you forgiven me?"

Bob shook his head. "I don't know," he said; "or if I have anything to forgive. I have only loved you. You could do or be what you liked to me, I should love you just the same. Nothing of that made any difference to me—nothing ever could."

Then Mrs. Burne came out from her interview with Spilling. Mary and Bob were silent while they heard the door close and the rustle of her dress across the hall. Mrs. Burne's draperies were habitually worn longer than fashion or utility ordained for walking-skirts, and the train of her dress was ever a little on one side. To keep her mother's bonnet, always a noticeable article, with its feathers and flowers and bits of tinsel lace, straight upon her handsome head was more than Mary could manage. With head-gear awry, good-humored and smiling, she now appeared upon the top of the steps which led to the hall door of The Cedars,

"Why, Bob," she said, "you never told me how bad poor Spilling is! He isn't long for this world, Mary, my dear, and that I'll stake my life on."

The windows of the room in which the master of the house lay were open, and not many yards distant from the steps which Mrs. Burne, exclaiming and chattering in her cheery voice, was descending.

"My dear, he's got dropsy of the liver," she went on. "'Tis the drink. I've seen a lot so. He'll linger, perhaps, but they won't cure him. Mark my words. And him with such a lot to spend! Poor Spilling! Well, I always liked him, and so I told him just now."

Bob did not even hear her. He was thinking of something nearer and dearer to him than his friend. While speaking to Mary, a project which had been floating for long in his brain resolved itself into a settled purpose. He bent forward and spoke eagerly in her ear.

"I shall go away—go at once," he said; "when you see me again—if ever you see me—things will be different with me in all except that one thing which will always be the same. It may be for a long time—say good-bye to me."

Mrs. Burne caught the last words. "Why, Bob," she said, leaning over the side to tuck her skirts into the carriage, "'tisn't much of a good-bye. Mary don't seem in any hurry to get married, and there's you'll be coming to Ashfields to see the old place. We have to climb the gate to get into the garden now, and there's more weeds than flowers in the beds, but that's all the difference—"

Bob was unheeding of all but the face into which he looked; he had got Mary's hand in his, and was crushing it with unconscious strength.

"If I get on—if things are different—I may come back?" he said; then, as she opened her lips, "Don't answer—don't speak—wait till I come. Say only good-bye—"

"Good-bye, dear Bob," Mary said; her eyes were full of tears; it was through a mist that she saw the familiar face whitened by emotion. She pulled her hand from his and gave that chuck to the reins which was the pony's signal for starting. Mrs. Burne, talking still, and still stooping to arrange her garments about her feet, was jerked forward by the suddenness of the movement, and forgot to say farewell to the young man in her anger with Mary at not giving her due notice.

"You as near as possible sent me pitching onto my nose," she cried, indignantly, as they drove on, "and have given me a crick in

the neck, and— Well, now, what are you goin' to do? What are you waitin' for?"

For as suddenly as they had started they had pulled up.

Mary turned and looked back over her shoulder. Bob was standing as they had left him, motionless, looking after them. In a minute he was again by Mary's side.

She looked him very gravely in the eyes. "I wanted to tell you to come back—to be sure to come back—I shall be waiting," she said; and, before he could reply, had administered another chuck to the reins and had driven on again.

When Burton returned to the room where the invalid lay he found Spilling impatiently awaiting him.

"I thought you'd gone off with them," he said. "What the dickens have you been after?"

Bob took up his accustomed place without reply, and presently the other went on.

"Did you hear what that old woman said?" he asked, looking anxiously in his friend's face. "Said I was dying. Bawled it out on my own door-step. She might have been a little decent about it—the old devil—even if it's true."

"It isn't true," Bob said, very confident, because so inexperienced. "You're queer, but you're no more of a croaker at this moment than I am. Look how bad you were! You're a king to that."

Spilling's questioning eyes left the face of the young fellow in the window and examined his own hands; turned wistfully upon the landscape—the bright and beautiful garden, so sweet and gay and exquisitely ordered; travelled presently to where the surrounding country was shut from view by a high stone-wall and a row of poplars. Long he looked at them with a troubled face, then waved his hand in their direction.

"I'll have those trees down," he said, irritably. "Remind me, and I'll have it done to-morrow. They shut me in till I can't breathe. A man might as well be in his coffin at once as shut in like this. They're so cursedly stiff and self-satisfied looking, too—like that prig of a parson at Gaythorpe, and his long, stuck-up, hee-hawing ass of a brother. That's it! I wondered why I hated 'em so, and now I know. Tell Parfitt, old man, and we'll make a sweep of the lot to-morrow."

He looked down again at his hands, which were yellow and shaking. "She needn't have been so preciously cheerful about it, even

if I am going to peg out—that dirty, fine old girl! She'll be none the better for my death, anyway. She didn't want to be so cock-sure."

"You won't die, I tell you," Bob said, with his thoughts elsewhere.

Spilling shook his head. "I don't want to," he said; "but—I don't know. I'll tell you what I should like to do, Bob: I should like to get well, and get free, and marry Mary. Begin over again—cut out that long-legged, starchy fellow, and marry Mary. That's what I should like—to get well, and begin again, and do that! As sure as I'm laid here by the leg, I've always had a weakness for that girl—always—always! She's the splendidest woman I've ever come across—I swear she is—and yet with such a way with her that a poor miserable devil like me can be at his ease before her and not feel uncomfortable or afraid. She didn't treat you over-handsome, old man, but for all that there ain't her equal—and you're in love with her still, and you think you know all about her, but you don't know what I do, nor what brought her here to-day. Bob, she's an angel—she's better, she's a woman, handsome as a picture—and good! Mind you, I've known women—oh, good Lord, I've known 'em! and not too much good of 'em—but I've never known another like Mary Burne—not to take my fancy so. And I'd like her to know what I think of her—for I've never told her—how could I, poor, unfortunate beggar?—nor ever shall—but I'd like her to know, and she shall—she shall—by Heaven, she shall!"

He had worked himself up to great excitement; tears ran down his cheeks and choked his voice.

"Easy—easy, old man," Bob said to him, warningly.

But poor Spilling's emotions were no longer under his control. He raised his shaking hand and let it fall heavily on the back of the sofa.

"She shall know it!" he repeated; "I 'ont do what she asked me—I 'ont for her sake, and because, bad as I've been, I'm not bad enough, and never was, to blacken the character of any woman—least of all her's. I'd cut out my tongue sooner; I take an oath I would—"

He stopped to cry a little, and then in his excited, weak voice began again:

"Bob, I've never told the tale to mortal; but I'll tell it now, though I swore I wouldn't. 'Twas that little fool, Lally. She and Mary went up to London together, and I got in the carriage with

them—'twas last year when the *Empress* was down' at Ryde, and Ray and Bevan were aboard her, and I was to join them for a week or so. And, half-laughing, half-earnest—for I was horribly sweet on Mary then—I said what fun we'd have if things were different and the girls could come along with me. We'd sail away and have done with parsons and weddings (Lally was come up to buy her frocks and things for the marriage, and wasn't too much looking forward to it, as any one could see), and never come home any more.

"And we laughed, and I told 'em where we'd go and the sprees we'd have, and we wondered what they'd say in Gaythorpe and in Midborough if none of us three came back. At St. Pancras I lost sight of the girls, and that, as far as I'd any thought, was the finish.

"But it wasn't. That little idiot and fool, Lally—without another word or sign from me—before Heaven I swear it—she came, Bob. I found her that night in my rooms—she'd run away—run away from her prig of a parson, and come to me!

"And when Mary missed her, and came straight on, that double-dyed fool and rogue, that man of mine—thinking the worst of me, like all his accursed class—he sent her away with a lie—poor girl—swore no woman was there, and thought he'd done me a service. And—may God forgive me for the way I thanked him!—for what had I ever done—what had I ever been that should have made him wiser?

"I took her back myself, Bob, the next day, as soon as I could get her to go, for she was afraid, the fool! and cried and shook and held on to me—she'd have gone with me to the devil then rather than back to Mary! And if I was to tell the world—and if she was to tell—the true history of that spree of hers, there's not a soul would believe us—for I've been a bad lot, Bob, and I've got a bad name. But I took her straight to Mary, and I looked Mary in the face—and could I have done that, Bob—could I have done that—if—"

He had worked himself up to a pitch of excitement, and he started into a sitting posture on the sofa. Burton, who had listened with a startled attention, went to him, and laid a restraining hand upon his shoulder.

"Easy, easy, old man!" he said, soothingly. "You're a good fellow—Spilling—you're a good fellow!"

"I'm not that—I never was that!" Spilling cried, the tears of weakness running down his cheeks, and he grasped Bob's hand and held it in both of his, as a woman might have done. "But she was

only a bit of a child—and the other girl was her sister—and I'm a ruffian—I'm a ruffian, Bob, but I ain't a ruffian all through—"

He lay and gulped down his emotion, with many a gasp and a broken sob, for a minute or so, and then went on again:

"And now this precious tale's got about, it seems. That infernal man of mine must have talked; and Lal's afraid of her ass of a parson that gives me the jim-jams whenever I see him—and Lal's got a baby, and is what she always was, a poor half-rocked idiot, and there comes this splendid girl to me, and almost goes on her knees—she does, by George!—and tells me she has let it be believed 'twas she—Mary, not Lal—that played the fool; and begs of me, if I get the chance, to say the same. And I had to promise to pacify her; but I won't—I swear I won't—I swear I won't!"

His voice broke and failed him there; he lay with his hand clasped over his eyes, his breathing very troubled.

"Oh, Bob!" he said at length, dropping his hand weariedly from his face. "If the luck had been different with me—if I had not been quite so rich, and had been a little more fortunate; if I hadn't ruined every prospect I had in life by marrying the woman I did, and if I could have been a decent enough fellow to be spliced up with Mary Burne—"

Bob, standing in the window, had turned his back upon the poor fellow on the couch. The conversation did not please him, yet he could not resent it. He rattled the keys in his trousers-pocket by way of answer.

"Oh yes—if everything had been different for all of us!" he said, very slowly. "But wishing and sighing don't much alter cases. And my marrying Mary wouldn't have made it any the better for you, would it, eh?"

Bob only rattled his keys louder, still looking out of the window. Then on a sudden he turned round, and went and sat close to his friend upon that chair on which Mary had sat.

"She isn't going to be married to that Garnett, Spilling, after all," he said. "I don't know why, but she isn't. That mayn't make it any the better for me—but—Herbert, let me get away. I can't stay here any longer—mooning about, doing nothing. Give me a chance—let me go and work."

"You went before, and what good did you do? And I want you," Spilling said.

"But where's the sense of my sitting about and looking at you that I wish I could help, but that I can't help? I tell you that it's

worse than death to me—and you must let me go! I love that girl. I do, and I want to get away and work for her. I shall never marry her—I know that—but if I am leading a life that is fit for a man to lead I can bear to think of her, at least. You don't want me, Spilling—you'll soon be all right again; but, even if you do want me, let me go. There isn't room for me in England. I'll borrow the passage-money of you, and get away—go to Canada or New Zealand or the Cape—I don't care where—anywhere where there's room for me, and I can work."

"Look here!" Spilling said. "Stop with me a little time, Bob, and if I get well I'll go along with you, and if you want to rough it we'll rough it together; and if—as the old woman expects—I'm 'come for,' you shall have my money. There's most of it tied up in some infernal way we don't want to bother about; but there's a thirty or forty thousand or so I can do as I like with. I'll leave it to you to marry Mary with—if you stay—and I die."

But Bob knew the woman he loved was not to be bought, and if she had been he knew that he would not have cared to buy her so. Those last words of Mary's made him impatient to be gone that he might return to her, and he made it at last evident to Herbert Spilling that he was not to be turned from his purpose by even that rich bribe which had been offered.

CHAPTER XXV

"FOR BABY'S SAKE!"

MONA was the first to become curious over the fact that Claude Garnett came no longer to Gaythorpe Hall, and, the rupture of the engagement becoming in time known, she it was who considered herself to be most deeply injured and who evinced the greatest indignation. She had never stayed away from home in her life, and she had been looking forward a great deal to her visits to Bygrave Court, and had let her mind dwell with pleasure upon the interesting events which most likely would befall her there. She would have been in a position to show them how to play tennis, for one thing. Then, Mary, who was very liberal with anything she had, would be sure to give her sister pretty dresses, and, she being the next in order to Mary, it would be a good thing for her to go where there were eligible young men who were quite sure to fall in love with her.

For, Mary once out of the way, Mona was aware that she herself was very good-looking indeed. Algy Hopson and all of them were so used to her they did not appear to take any notice, but Mona knew it all the same. So she was cross, and gave Mary a bit of her mind, and pointed out how selfishly she had behaved in letting Claude give her up. It was not as if Mary had only herself to consider, Mona said.

But Tina and Iona were not cross at all—much relieved, on the contrary, that that dreaded future was no longer threatening them in which "our Mary" was to be taken away from them. A terrible calamity which had seemed to make the room blacker when their candle was taken away at night, which had troubled them when they awoke before daylight on winter mornings. When it thundered, or the sun suddenly ceased to shine, or the church-bells rang, the mysterious oppression which fell upon the spirits of Tina and Iona must surely mean that Mary was going away!

Mr. Burne troubled Mary with very few remarks on the subject. The loss of Claude Garnett, from whom he had unsuccessfully endeavored to borrow money, did not appear to him an irremediable

misfortune, and as he would have been obliged to raise money to pay for Mary's trousseau, the breaking off of the marriage was probably a relief to him rather than not.

As for Mary's mother, what she felt in the matter she expressed without reserve to any one who would listen, after her artless, friendly fashion :

"He behaved shameful !" she declared at the Rectory, at the village shop, in her own kitchen, to any of the neighbors who came to "hear all about it," and who listened with much enjoyment while Mrs. Burne held forth.

All of which did not make Mary's position the more dignified or the pleasanter. But she went about the day's occupation and kept the smile on her face lest any one should dare to say that she grieved. "What, fretting for your sweetheart?" they seemed to say, if for a moment she withdrew within herself. And for him, whose affection had been so worthless, who had given her up at a word, she vowed to herself that she would not fret ! It was only that, just for the moment, life, for the first time in her twenty years, failed to interest her ; that the familiar voices and faces jarred upon her nerves ; that all the fret and worry of bills that could not be paid, and frocks and shoes that must be bought, seemed intolerable ; that the glorious summer weather made her weary, the sweet scents in the fields and hedge-rows sick at heart.

All of this would change. She did not doubt that the day would come when she would be herself again ; when golden sunshine and silver moonlight would make her glad ; when once again the nightingale singing on the lilac-bush outside her window at night, the linnets chirping on dewy mornings in the yellow gorse, would come to be things to be thankful for, and would cease to be a cruelty. That once more, as of old, she would be glad to get up to begin the day, and would no longer turn leaden-footed from her bed, oppressed only with the longing to fling herself back upon her pillow to weep away the burden upon her heart.

To say truth, just for the present it was only with Lally and Lally's baby that she found life supportable. While Lally, for her part, was only happy if Mary was at her side. She did not want to talk to her sister. Mary was safe from questioning about the lost lover by little Mrs. Cecil's couch. For long, indeed, she talked very little on any subject, being so feeble and low-spirited and tired, and that little only of baby. But if Mary was present she had a sense of *safety* and well-being. Mary would take care of her—she would

not let anything else be found out—and Cecil could not interrogate his wife further on a certain miserable subject if Mary was there.

And when she was promoted to the couch in her bedroom, how amusing it was to see Mary with baby. Looking on, it seemed as if Mary of the beautiful face, the strong and vigorous frame, had been created solely to hold an infant on her lap, to touch it with soft caressing fingers! She was so comical, she had such funny ways with it, such amusing talk! Lally, from among her pillows, would laugh to see Mary sitting on the floor holding long conversations with the little unconscious, unresponsive thing in her lap. Baby was made to wave his small blue fist, and to give opinions on matters concerning his mamma and the household with most precocious wisdom. He asked questions as to the meaning and usefulness of his mysterious garments, inquired anxiously as to the growth of the hair on his little bald head, and expressed opinions unfavorable to the pap on which he was fed.

The Rector, stopping outside her door, would hear his little wife's laugh, and thank God in his heart that she was so well and happy. Entering, he would wonder why the smile died so quickly off her face, the look of uneasiness and apprehension taking its place. He had been of late so gentle with her, he had not found it in his heart to administer one lecture, to reprove her for a single foolish speech, since her illness—it grieved him that she should flush and pale at his appearance as though she were afraid, that she should shrink affrightedly from the hand that loved to linger on her hair.

"Why do you never seem merry when I am with you, darling?" he asked her. (It was a little foolish of him, certainly, to expect that she should—he was something of a wet blanket of a man at the best of times.) "I heard you laughing gayly enough as I came in."

"It is Mary, who is so funny with baby," Lally would explain. "I hope Mary is not gone home. You will send her up again, Cecil, when you go."

For Mary, at the Rector's appearance, would hastily replace the baby in its cradle or hand it over to nurse, and quickly disappear.

"It is always Mary!" Cecil said more than once, with a little natural jealousy. "I am more to you than Mary, dearest? you love me best in the world, do you not?"

Then Lavarina, the feeble and the foolish, would cling to him for a moment and cry "yes—yes—that she loved him; but that she wanted Mary—she was so safe with Mary."

Now this "sick fancy," as he called it, of his wife's, grieved the

good young Rector. For, was Mary the companion a girl so pure-minded and innocent and young should have for a constant associate? Yet it generally ended in his going away and sending Mary up again; for the fragility of his wife's appearance and her protracted weakness terrified him, and he feared above all things that she should be distressed.

So baby would be pulled out of his cot again to congratulate his Auntie Mary on her return, and to say disrespectful things (oh, naughty Auntie Mary!) of his reverend papa behind his back, and to converse on the order of man that he himself meant to be when he grew up, and to coax his poor little mamma to smiles and laughter once more.

Thus the time went slowly on, and Master Garnett, to his mother's despair, grew balder about his pink crown, and had his sleeves tied up with ribbons by his Aunt Mary—always given over to the pomps and vanities of the world—and the summer waxed to its height, and Lally was pronounced to be strong enough to be carried down-stairs.

Then the Rector, not exactly a muscular Christian himself, was grieved and terrified to discover how easily that operation could be performed, and how light a burden he carried in his arms. He was still as ardently in love with his unsatisfactory little invalid wife as the heart of woman could wish. He put up with the presence of the lace-befrilled cradle by his study-table without a murmur, and, as he went his parish rounds, he remembered to gather the wild-flowers from the hedges to take home to Lally's sofa. Once, even, when she had seemed particularly depressed, he made a call upon Mrs. Le Grice and purchased a screw of those particular jujubes which Lally affected; and good Mrs. Le Grice, learning that they were for the little customer who had been used to wheedle goodies out of her from the age of two, sent double weight for money; so that, a few at a time, as Cecil doled them out, the sweeties lasted Mrs. Garnett quite a length of time.

It was deemed prudent to keep all topics of an exciting or disturbing tendency out of Lally's sick-room, and it was not until she had been promoted to the couch in the library for several weeks that she learned the news about Mary. When she did, it was Mary herself who told her.

Happening one day to look at her sister with eyes more observant than usual, Lally noticed for the first time that Mary was thinner, *that the color had faded in her cheek, that her hair was arranged*

with less care; and, for once in a while letting her thoughts dwell on a subject out of herself, Mrs. Garnett decided that certainly Mary was not looking her best, and that it was a good thing Claude was not there to see.

"Claude has never seen baby yet," she said, presently, recording the fact with some surprise, for people who had not the honor of being any relation to him had called and begged permission to make the young gentleman's acquaintance.

"Perhaps he is waiting until you are strong enough to take him to Bygrave," Mary said, with what indifference she could command, but with the color his name would always bring there flaming in her cheeks.

"But why should he wait for that?" Lal asked, wondering more now that she had considered. She looked with newly-awakened suspicion into Mary's face. "Why doesn't he come? Why hasn't Claude been here all this long time, Mary?" she asked.

Then Mary, knowing that sooner or later the unpleasant truth would have to be told, told her.

"I am no longer Claude's keeper," she said. "Don't ask me of his movements, Lal."

"Oh, Mary! You and he have not quarrelled?" Lally demanded, wide-eyed, raising herself on her elbow.

"Quarrelled? Not we. Nothing so amusing. We tired of each other—that is all."

"Mary! Your engagement isn't over?"

"Over and forgotten," Mary said, and contrived to laugh.

"But—Mary—!"

"Oh, don't talk about it!" Mary cried, sharply; and Lally saw that that rich color had faded, leaving the face cold and gray, and hardly any longer beautiful at all. "If you talk about it," Mary threatened, "I will go away."

Then she had seized on the little nephew, and Lally had been afraid to ask any more. But after that she watched her sister with anxious attention, and she noticed many a sign in her appearance and manner that she had failed to observe before.

"Cecil, did *Claude* give *Mary* up?" she asked her husband, uneasily.

"I believe it was mutually arranged," Cecil said, cheerfully, and proceeded to explain to her that though, through dread of distressing her, he had kept the news of the broken engagement from his wife, it was yet very good news—the best of news—the pair having been all along most unsuited to each other.

"But Mary was so in love with him," Lally said, perplexedly. "She never made the least secret—I know she was in love with him. And Claude was so quiet, but I always thought that Claude—"

"Claude fancied himself in love also," the Rector said, easily. "It is matter for sincere congratulation when such mistakes are discovered in time. It would have been a disastrous marriage, dearest; Claude is most fastidious—most difficult to please. We have always said a wife would have to be specially manufactured for Claude! I have been thinking lately that I should not be surprised if my brother Claude never married—not at all surprised."

Then the Rector half turned from his wife and looked down upon the little sleeping head in the cradle. "In which case, you know, Lally," he said—"in which case—"

But he did not complete the sentence. A worldly and a selfish consideration had visited him many times since the birth of his son. He was ashamed of the thought, and pulled himself up when trembling on the verge of communicating it to Lally; but, in spite of himself, he was conscious of regarding his offspring with increased interest and respect since the chance of his son's being the head of the family had entered the father's head.

Lally did not seek to follow his train of thought. She was uneasy. Try as she would, she could not put from her mind the suspicion that Mary was suffering and unhappy. Things that her sister had said of Claude, which had made no impression at the time, kept recurring to her; and looks and tones of Claude when the pair had been together, or he had spoken of Mary. How soon they had tired, after all! What did it mean—were they hiding something from her? Conscience made a coward of Lally. She dared ask no leading questions, but she felt that there was something—something that would make her very frightened and unhappy if she knew. How tiresome it was! And just when everything ought to have been so nice and smooth for her who so hated difficulties. Lally tried hard to forget, and to think only of pleasant things; but she could not.

And now that the secret was once out, every one made the broken engagement the topic of conversation. Mona, who hated the Rector, and who habitually spoke of Lally among the members of her own family as "a selfish pig" (Mona was always particularly severe on the vice of selfishness), went down to the Rectory on purpose to vent her personal grievance in the matter. It wasn't only a chance for *Mary*, it was a chance for all of them—even Lally must see that

much—especially a chance for Mona—and Mary had thrown all their chances away!

She had pleased herself, she supposed, Lally said.

But Mona knew better. Mary was ready to give her eyes to get him back, Mona declared; and she proceeded to relate how, going into Mary's room for a glass of water one night—quite in the middle of the night—she had found Mary sobbing so wildly in bed that she had been frightened, and had shut the door again without having been heard. And Mary had become so irritable at lessons of mornings that Mona had given them up entirely; she simply would not submit to it; and as for the little ones, they either did nothing but play—Mary being too much lost in thought to attend to them—or did their tasks in bitter weeping, Mary having become so cross.

And had Lally noticed how Mary's good-looks were going? Why, by bedtime her cheeks were like lead, and her eyes were half-shut and had black rings beneath them, larger and hollower than mamma's. If this went on much longer, people would give up calling Mary the beauty of the family, Mona opined, with a sidelong look in the chimney-glass.

Mrs. Burne, choosing an hour when she knew the Rector would be from home, would also appear frequently by Lally's sofa to expatiate upon the theme; would explain with much volubility to Lally that her husband's brother was a scoundrel that deserved to be horsewhipped, and that he had forfeited the right forever to hold up his head and call himself a gentleman. Why could they not let poor little Mrs. Cecil forget it? The very servants at the Rectory, knowing, as is the undesirable habit of their kind, a great deal more about the matter than was convenient or consistent with fact, commented to their mistress, who had always been content to gossip with them on every subject, upon the change for the worse in "Miss Mary's" looks.

At last Lally, having been tormented by her own fears and by the talk of others until she all at once lost control of herself, involuntarily asked a question she regretted directly it escaped her, and dreaded to have answered.

"Cecil—that story about Mary and Herbert Spilling—did you tell it to Claude?"

And when her worst fears were realized, and she found that he had done so, she turned her face to the back of her couch, and, after her fashion when angry or grieved, refused to let it be seen again for hours.

Her husband hovered about her, much put out at her behavior, and he laid an admonishing but tender hand upon her bright hair and encouragingly patted her shoulder. Was it possible that she was annoyed with him? Would she have had him allow his brother—such a man as Claude—to marry a woman of whom that story could be told?

Lally made no answer. She did not cry, but lay silent, still, and sullen. The Rector had seen her in that mood before, but he was alarmed, hurt, and perplexed as if it were a fresh experience. Not his entreaties and commands, not nurse with her chicken broth and jelly, not the weeping of the baby even, could move Lally.

"Did she feel worse?" the Rector asked her. "Should he fetch the doctor—should he go for Mary?" With great reluctance this last suggestion, for since she had been considered stronger, he had thought it his duty to discourage the visits of the sister.

At the name Lally turned with childish anger upon him, and desired, pettishly, to be let alone, declaring that if Mary set foot in the house she herself would run out of it. She wished never to set eyes on Mary again, never—never again, she said.

The Rector gave a sigh of relief and satisfaction; he saw and understood the situation. It was shame which had overcome poor Lally—shame at the thought of Claude's participation in the ugly secret. He dared not tell her that the tale was spreading from mouth to mouth now, and that more than once he had found himself compelled to give the correct rendering of the story which had become twisted and distorted in repetition. For Lally's sake he had found it necessary to be definite.

For a couple of days Lavarina maintained her attitude of sulky silence, and restricted her view of affairs to the leather-covered back of the sofa. Once only she turned round suddenly when her husband was stooping over her, and lifted a white, tear-blotted face to his shocked gaze.

"Cecil," she said, feverishly, "I want Claude. Get him here at once. There is something I have to say to him. I want to say it quickly."

But Claude, his brother knew well, would not be lured into that neighborhood in a hurry. Nay, would it not have been a very dangerous experiment to bring him there—into the very lion's jaws, so to say, again? Besides, Lally and Claude had never had much *in common*. Cecil put no faith in Claude's ability to do the poor *girl any good*.

"I can give any message you wish to send to Claude, dearest," he said. "You and Claude have no secrets from me, I suppose?"

"Little hysterical, babyish fool!" the doctor said to himself, when he had seen her. "Send her and her child with Mary Burne away for a change," he advised aloud. "She has not brain enough to go mad," he said to himself, as he drove away; "but she is doing her best to make herself into a jibbering idiot—no very violent transformation either, for that matter."

It was with difficulty that they persuaded her to take food. She did not appear to sleep, although she lay so still; and the nurse who occupied the same room with her said that she passed the nights in weeping.

On the third day the Rector, coming into the library at noontime, found the sofa empty, the cradle not in its place. Nurse, running down-stairs at the sound of the opening door and his step in the hall, called upon him to go to her mistress at once.

"Is she worse?" he asked, a dreadful apprehension seizing upon him, for the woman's manner was flurried, her voice urgent.

"Very queer, sir," the nurse said. "I do not conceal it from you, sir, that I do not like the looks of my missis. To speak the truth, she is, in her manner of carrying on, wonderful like another of my mississes who died raging mad, poor dear, in a lunatic asylum."

Since she was dressed that morning, the Rector was further informed, Mrs. Garnett had not moved a foot or a finger, but had sat on the side of her bed "a-starin' at the carpet at her feet."

"I've got it brought home to me, sir, that that po'r young thing is bent on doing herself or the lamb of a child a mischief," the nurse cheerfully concluded, and added that as the potential murderer and her probable victim were alone up-stairs at that moment, it would be advisable for the husband and father to quicken his steps.

Garnett, having waited to severely snub the woman for her flights of fancy, and to caution her never to repeat such ridiculous statements in his hearing or his house, went up-stairs. Arrived at his wife's bedroom door he listened for a minute with his hand on the lock. There was a great stillness. Entering, he encountered Lally's wide blue eyes staring tragically at him from out her childish, pretty face. She was white as the white wrappers she wore.

Surely that wretched woman had been right, and the child was mad! Or why was there such a terror of him—such a horror, it seemed—in her eyes? Why did she shiver away with that silent

watching of him when, holding out his hands reassuringly to her, he approached?

"My darling wife!" he said. "My darling!"

But she would not suffer him to touch her. Shrinking from contact with him, she slipped upon her feet, and, astonished, he saw her make her way with wavering, feeble steps—for she was not yet used to walk—to the cradle on the other side of the room. Arrived there she fell upon her knees at the cradle side, and pulled the sleeping baby into her arms. Then rising with difficulty to her feet again, she staggered with her light burden to her husband's side.

"Cecil," she cried, bursting into wild and stormy weeping; "I have been wicked. I told you a lie. For baby's sake forgive me."

Looking with appealing terror into his shocked and startled face, she stretched out the child to him in her feeble arms; when, staring at her in the utmost bewilderment, he made no response, her strength gave way, and she dropped at his feet, and lay there in a piteous heap, her head against his knee.

"I was afraid," she wailed, "and I told a lie. It was not Mary that ran away; it was I. Oh, Cecil! I dared not tell you."

He stood above her as if turned to stone.

"You?" he said, at length. "*You?* You were engaged to be my wife. It was the month before we married—it could not have been *you!*"

"It was I," she repeated, in a strained whisper. She was so feeble she had not strength to sob for long. "I didn't love you much—then—and I was afraid of you. I love you now. I am afraid still, but—I love you now."

She thought, perhaps, that he would fling her from him, and would curse her; but he did not move, and the only word that fell from him in the silence that followed was a name very sacred to him indeed, and which had been on his lips often enough, but had never fallen from them in such an agony before.

"My God!" he said. "My God!"

She had taken one arm from her child, and passed it around his legs as he stood above her, and she drew herself closer to him, and clung to him in the desperation of her love and her fear.

The silence that fell upon them was to Lally full of terror, and yet cost her an agony of effort to break.

"I thought it would be dull with you," she whispered, in the voice *that was* so pathetic in its mingling of childish terror and fear of *punishment* with womanly love and despair, and without lifting her

head from his knee against which it was pressed: "I thought it would be better—more lively—with him. And then he took me to Mary. It was Mary—who took care of me—who brought me away—"

Her voice died away in an incoherent wail. Again the Rector only spoke to call upon that sacred name. Again the intolerable silence fell.

Holding the sleeping child in one arm, with the other clinging to him still, Lally rose slowly to her knees and looked up in her husband's face. What she saw there terrified her. The white, thin-featured face looked as hard and as cold as stone; the narrow, steel-blue eyes were gazing, not at her or at the child, but were fixed straight before him. His hands were clinched as if to strike, and were stretched with a nervous tension at a little distance from his sides. He looked to Lally cruel and relentless. She thought she read her doom in the glaring eyes, and the sight was too much for the feeble nature of the frightened girl. She gave a shriek of terror as he looked.

"Don't send me away from you—don't—don't!" she shrieked, frantically, giving expression at last to the fear that had all along possessed her. "I can't live away from you—and baby! Cecil—I won't go away—you sha'n't send me! Forgive me—oh, forgive me for baby's sake."

She unwound her arm from about him, and with a last despairing effort of strength held the child up to him.

"For baby's sake!—for baby," she said.

Then his eyes lost their fixed expression, and fell upon her; and all the coldness and hardness of his face slowly broke up. He caught the child as his wife wavered and drooped away from him, and with a sob he fell upon his knees beside her, and bent his head over fainting wife and unconscious child.

"May God forgive you—and me—and me—and me!" he said.

CHAPTER XXVI

DE MORTUIS NIL NISI BONUM

Mrs. BURNE was enjoying her daily after-dinner nap when Cecil Garnett made his appearance in her drawing-room, and asked to be allowed to see Mary.

"Mary? Goodness knows where she is!" Mary's mother said, slowly turning her feet from the sofa, and reluctantly assuming a sitting position. All her splendid, still glossy black hair was in disorder, her cap with the smart pink aigrette fell over one cheek. "Mary's been with po'r Spillin'," she added, as remembrance came back to her. "The young man's got a chill, and is going—as I said he'd go—and he sent for Mary to bid him good-bye. 'Twas a wonderful pity his'bein' married and that, and tied up with that hussy of his, for he was head over ears with Mary, and would have been the making of her and all of us. Now she's been cryin' her eyes out about him—but what's the good, as I tell her."

"Mrs. Burne," Cecil said, in a peculiarly spiritless tone—he was pale and heavy-eyed, and his bearing was quite devoid of his usual priggish self-assertiveness. "You know that there has been—talk—in connection with Mr. Spilling and—your daughter?"

Mrs. Burne shifted her eyes and set her cap straight. "When a man—married or not—is in love with a pretty girl—there's talk, I suppose," she said.

"All that should, I think, have been told to me," Cecil said, standing with hanging head and hands clasped at his back.

His mother-in-law laughed and shrugged her fine shoulders. "I don't know that any secret was made of it," she said; "and what business are Mary's love affairs of yours, Cecil?"

"The fact that—your daughter—ran away from her aunt's house to the house of this other man—this married man—this reprobate! Was that nothing to me?"

She grew a little pale, but she laughed foolishly still. "A girl's trick like that!" she said; "what was there to tell? The man took care of her, and she came home again—and there was an end of it."

"Mrs. Burne—on your honor—which of your daughters was it

who did that thing? I have been told that you were put in possession of the whole circumstances of the case—that your sister-in-law, Miss Burne, gave you the full history, and has ceased to visit at your house or to receive any of your daughters since the disgraceful occurrence—which was it?”

“Why, the one he was in love with, of course,” she said, without an instant’s hesitation—“Mary.”

She turned from him to toss up the cushions on which she had been lying. “There was no harm done,” she said; “nothing to make a piece of work about.” She started at the tone of voice in which he interrupted her:

“Woman—do not lie!” Cecil burst forth, suddenly standing erect, anger blazing in his eyes. “I know the truth—and from my wife. She has told me falsehood upon falsehood—she has deceived me—she has committed grievous sin—and the fault lies at your door. I, too, am a sinner. I do not condemn you. In better, holier days than these childlessness was considered a curse; yet a woman had better die a barren wife than live to teach her children to lie.”

Mary was standing at the school-room window looking out sad-eyed upon the neglected garden, where such flowers as poppies, marigolds, mignonette, sowing themselves year by year, ran riot in profusion, but where all such as required care and attention had long ceased to appear. Now and again efforts had been made by Mary herself to reduce the overgrown beds to order, but the task was beyond her: there were too many acres of uncut grass and moss-grown walks; the undergrowth of nettle, of thistle, of dandelion had been established too long; she only succeeded in rendering herself hot, cross, and uncomfortable, and made no impression whatever upon the garden.

She turned now as the Rector entered, and he saw that her eyes were red with weeping. Those tears which she had shed for the broken troth of that lost love of hers—of those she had been ashamed, and had hidden them from all the world. But for poor Spilling, arrived at the sad end of his misspent, short life, she might openly weep. For whatever cause they fell, there was relief and luxury in those free-flowing tears. Cecil Garnett did not notice them. He crossed the room, and stood before her with downbent head.

“Mary,” he said, and she noticed with surprise the quaver in his deep and sonorous voice, and the alteration in his bearing, “I have

wronged you bitterly. I have come to bow myself before you, and to crave your forgiveness."

She looked at him without speaking in a moment's uncertainty, and then his meaning flashed across her, and her feeling was only of apprehension and dismay.

"Mary," he said, "my wife has told me all. She deceived me—she—"

Quickly Mary caught his hand. "And I, too," she said. "I am as greatly to blame."

"All falsehood is wrong," he said. "Yet if you erred you erred nobly. My poor little wife—"

His voice broke, and his head fell lower.

"She loved you," Mary said, gently, "and she feared to lose your love. Yet if you had known all you could not have found it in your heart to be harsh to her. She was such a child, and so full of a child's desire of enjoyment. A worse woman than Lally would have known better than to do such a foolish, ignorant, crazy thing."

"Who that hears the tale will believe it merited no harsher term than that? Yet I have forgiven my wife," the poor young Rector said. "Mary, what can I do but forgive what is so very dear to me? Whatever she had done I must forgive. To cast her off would be to pluck the very heart from my breast."

He drew his hands from hers, and covered his face with them. And from that day, when she saw him stand with bowed head before her, the tears of wounded affection and humbled pride dropping slowly through his fingers, Mary took her brother-in-law into her heart. She went closer to him, and laid her hand with a warm pressure upon his shoulder.

"I was proud and I have been punished," he said, brokenly, "and humbled, Mary—humbled to the dust."

"You need not be afraid for Lally, he said presently. "I shall be very gentle with her—my poor little wife whom I love next to my God, and whom I have only succeeded in making afraid."

"You have succeeded in making her love you," Mary said, gently, with her kind hand still upon his shoulder.

Presently he lifted his head and showed her his face, white and pinched-looking, with red rims about the eyes.

"Do you know where I am going now?" he asked. "I am going to Claude. I am going to unsay before him all that I have said—going to unbind from your neck the burden of shame you have borne *so nobly*, to lay it—you know where. Mary, there is something else

I shall say to him. I shall say it is my belief that a man cannot do better for his welfare here and hereafter than take for his companion the woman whom with all his soul he loves. I shall say that you are of all women I have known the most faithful, tender, and generous."

Mary half turned away from him. "What is all that to Claude now?" she said. "Better far to leave things as they are."

"Do you for a moment imagine that I could do that? Allow my brother—any one—to believe a lie of you which I had told?"

"For your wife's sake, Cecil, you might do even that."

"For my manhood's sake I could not," he said.

Before he left he made her say in so many words that she forgave him. "Between Claude and you all will come right," he said.

"All is right," she assured him. "All is as is best. Do not make any mistake, Cecil. Listen. Your brother set me free to make other plans for my life—and I have made them."

On the day after Herbert Spilling's death a letter in his handwriting was brought to Mary Burne, which she found to have been written several weeks before he died. It bore the date, indeed, of the day on which Bob Burton had left Midborough to set forth to seek his fortunes in another world. The envelope bore the direction, "To be given to Miss Burne if I die."

"MY DEAR MARY" (it ran), "I have always called you 'Mary' to myself and to Bob when he and I have been talking, so you mustn't mind. He's off now, and I'm lonely as the grave and about as dismal. I wish I had you here to sit by me as you did the other day and to talk to me. Perhaps you wonder I say this, and you'll wonder more by-and-by. I never said a word to you because you're a proud girl for all you're so easy to get on with, but all the same if I hadn't ruined myself for life before I saw you you're the girl out of all the world I'd have liked to marry. That's the truth, Mary, and God knows it, and so does Bob, for I told him—and I've a fancy (in case I peg out, and I feel bad enough at times to do it pretty quickly), you should know it too. For you're the nicest woman I've ever come across, and the pluckiest and the chummiest; and to have a girl like you to help me and to cheer me up while I'm going through this dismal work, would make things bearable.

"Bob wouldn't stay. He won't believe I'm booked—I'm not sure of it myself for that matter. He's off, do all I could to stop

him. There's one thing I want you to know. I offered to leave him money if he'd stop, and then he could have married you, and he wouldn't, and perhaps I'm glad. Bob isn't the chap to wait for dead men's shoes, and you aren't the girl to be bought for money. So he's gone—and he was the best and truest friend ever I had, and the most of a gentleman ever came into my house.

“But the money I wanted him to have I'm going to leave to you. And I ask you to take it and to do with it whatever you like—and whatever you like will be best. Mary, do you remember that morning when I brought little Lal home to you safe and sound? I've never forgot the look that was in your eyes. If things had been different, I think I would have gone away and shot myself then. Good-bye, dear. It's queer to think, if you ever read this, I shall be dead as mittens. There's no one likely to cry their eyes out over that misfortune. My sister, that gets the chief of my money—she hasn't been a very good friend to me, no more has her husband—she'll be glad though she won't say so. Perhaps a few poor wretches that have cheated me and snivelled to me will miss me. I've made a mess of my life, Mary. I'm best forgotten. If you hear my name when I'm gone you'll hear no good of it—only remember 'twas the name of a poor fellow that, bad as he was, knew how to love and honor you.

“HERBERT SPILLING.

“P.S.—You'll remember what a fine fellow old Bob Burton is?”

The contents of this letter did not take Mary by surprise; when she had stood beside his bed a day or two before he died, Spilling had said a word or two to her of the legacy he had left her; and Bob's name also had been spoken between them. Of the poor man's admiration of herself Mary was also by no means ignorant. She remembered when his predilection for her society had been an embarrassment to her. For although he always fully intended to disguise what he felt, and was honestly under the impression he had done so, his condition was often not such as to insure the carrying out of his resolutions. His tipsy gallantry, and the recollection of Lally's foolish escapade, had made the name of Herbert Spilling a sound which Mary had for long shuddered to hear.

All this had in an instant become matter of the past. Spilling, the bloated, the dissolute, of the amorous glance and the husky speech, had vanished from Mary's memory, and in his place appeared a poor fellow generous to a fault, faithful to his friend, cherishing a

hopeless love for herself. She recalled how he had striven, with what tact and wit drink had left him, to spare her foolish sister and to make matters bearable to herself on that wretched morning when she had found Lally in his home. How honorably he had kept their secret! If that wretched wife of his had not so early disgraced him, and sent him spinning along the road to destruction, what a different Spilling—happy, useful, respected—might there not have been!

And Bob—poor Bob, who also had loved her, and who had received such vile treatment at her hands! Bob Burton, who had been the idol of his mother's heart, alone and penniless in a strange land! Of him, also, Mary thought. And then she thought of the fortune which was to be hers. She was sensible and rational, and had known the want of money dearly; she did not pretend to herself to undervalue the fact that it was coming to her now. Of the amount of her legacy she was ignorant. It might be a thousand pounds—it might even be two. "Whatever it is," Mary said to herself, "I know what he wished me to do with it, and—yes—whatever happens I will do it."

CHAPTER XXVII

GOOD-BYE!

THE Burne family were seated at their eight o'clock supper. It was a meal made up of odds and ends left from the mid-day repast—the pleasantest of the day, Mrs. Burne always said—no formality about it. Formality, to give the family their due, being a totally unknown quantity in all their social and domestic functions. On this occasion a spirited argument was going on between Irene and her mother as to the expediency of taking stewed plums before or after cold meat pie. The windows of the dining-room were open, for the day had been sultry, and the evening was still and warm. There came a step on the gravel, and the front door bell rang.

"Who in the world!" said Mr. Burne. He paused with his cup of cocoa in his hand and opened his usually unspeculative eyes very wide; for unexpected visitors at that hour were scarce.

Mona had flown to the door and peeped out into the hall. She drew back her head quickly, and looked across at her eldest sister.

"It is some one for you, Mary," she said. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks flushed. Was it possible that the dear delights of Mary's left-off dresses and the gayeties of Bygrave Court were to be once more within her reach!

Mrs. Burne gave a great sigh of relief. "Good gracious!" she ejaculated. "My good gracious! I thought it was Spilling. As sure as I'm sittin' here I thought Spilling had come!"

Why she should have thought anything so impossible no one inquired, but if the poor young fellow lying in his coffin at Midborough had indeed come in his grave-clothes to make an evening call upon his sometime acquaintances, Mary's cheeks and lips could have grown no whiter. She had known the step.

Very slowly she arose, and passed Mona at the door. "In the drawing-room. I'll take care you're left alone with him," that young lady said.

It was Claude Garnett awaiting her in the twilight of the long room, standing, tall and pale and anxious-looking, in the midst of its faded ancient splendors and modern tawdriness. With a soft breath

lessness he spoke her name as she entered, and Mary, whose self-possession had come back to her in her progress through the hall, crossed the room and put out her hand to him as to any ordinary visitor. When he attempted to keep the hand she drew it gently away, and moving a few paces from him, sat down.

He followed and stood before her.

"Mary, I have come to ask to be forgiven," he said. "I do not deserve it, but you always gave me more than I deserved. You were always sweet as an angel—be an angel to me still. Forgive me."

"For what?"

"For being fool and villain enough to believe what I should have known at once to be the foulest lie. Mary, when Cecil came to me with that tale—"

"Oh, Cecil's tale!" Mary interrupted, with a certain quiet and subdued contemptuousness. "Cecil told you a certain thing—what could you do but believe it? Pray do not blame yourself for what was so natural. If you care for me to say so, I forgive you, of course."

He waited a moment, chilled by her tone. "Is that to be all?" he asked, presently, and with no assurance of manner. "Can't you give me something sweeter than your forgiveness? Won't you give me back your love, Mary?"

He came nearer to her, but she drew away from him, leaning back in her chair. He saw that her face was pale, but also that it was unsmiling and cold.

He spoke her name imploringly, and held out his hands to her. "My punishment has been heavy enough already," he said. "Don't make it greater than I can bear. If I believed—that—of you and loved you at the same time—could not cease to love you—longed for you at every instant of my life—longed for you! Is not that punishment enough?"

"I do not wish to punish you," she said, slowly. "I wish you only well. You were not happy in your engagement to me—and you are free. You are content, therefore, and I—am content. Let it be."

He bent over her for a moment, for the gloom that had gathered in the room made their faces indistinct; then he drew himself erect with a sigh.

"Is that so?" he said, gently, as if to himself. He had seen enough with his lover's eyes to know that she was neither happy nor content, but he was not the man, even in a matter of life and

death, roughly to contradict a woman. He saw also that, whether he deserved punishment or no, punishment was to be dealt out to him; and, in the long silence that followed, he strove to accustom himself to the bitterness of his fate without sign or complaint. Resignation was perhaps the last virtue he should have exhibited under the circumstances, but Claude Garnett even in supreme moments must be true to his own nature and up-bringing. To obtain the desire of his soul he could not be importunate; he would not "make a scene."

Their voices had throughout been so low that Mona, keeping guard outside the door, and now and again applying her ear to the keyhole to make sure the pair had not escaped through the windows, heard never a word. In the long silence which fell upon them Mary, sitting motionless in her chair, would have avoided looking at her former lover if she could. But it was so long since she had seen him—how long would it be before she saw him again!—and, against her will, her eyes travelled slowly over the carpet towards the rug on which he stood, as slowly lifted themselves, and were fixed upon his down-cast face.

Presently he lifted his head and met her gaze.

"Mary," he said, "you are mistaken in saying that I was not happy in our engagement. The happiness of my whole life, the very crown and joy of it has been you. Losing you I lose all that. I am poor indeed. I have no right to complain, but I should like you to understand that."

She continued to look at him without speaking. Her pride as well as her love had been deeply wounded. There was balm for both in his words. "For all my life," she said to herself, "the remembrance of this will be sweet."

"If I lose you," he went on, with an effort, "I have only my own folly to curse; in nothing do I hold you blameable; you are the one woman in all my life that I have truly loved; while I live I think that I am certain you will be the only one."

"Tell me this," Mary cried, impulsively, starting upright in her chair, a flash of color in her face. She had meant to leave him unquestioned, but her desire for information overcame her prudence—"that tale of me which Cecil told—was it that alone which made you give me up?"

"Was not that enough?" he asked.

"You should have known that it was a lie."

"But you had confessed to it."

"What if I had! I had confessed to a lie, and you should have known it; that is all. If all the world had come to you and had witnessed against me, you should not have believed. I confessed—I? What of that? If my tongue could turn traitor against me, you should have known that I—I myself could not be false to my nature. Often—often my tongue has been false; but my heart—that has always been true. You should have known that. And why could you not have come to me? A criminal, even, is not condemned without a trial. Even for Lally—for fifty Lallies—I would not have lost you—"

Her voice trembled and died away. Looking at her with startled eagerness, he drew nearer. She lifted her hand to keep him off.

"But you—you cannot wait," she went on, with the same thrill of excitement in her voice—"unheard I am to be condemned; glad of an excuse to be rid of me, you cast me off—"

"Mary! try to be just. In your heart you must know that that was not so."

"But it was—it was! Trusting you—feeling as sure of you—God forgive me!—as of my God, in a moment, without one word of explanation I find myself thrown over, dismissed with less consideration—courtesy even—than you would use to dismiss a servant—" She stopped suddenly, regained control of herself, and went on after a minute in a different voice: "I meant not to be angry," she said; "I will not be angry any more. It is all a matter of the past. Let there, in the present, be peace between us, and as little bitterness as may be."

She rose from her chair as though she would put an end to the interview, and he went quite close to her and took her hands in his.

"Dear," he said, and his voice was low and unsteady, "I have sinned—I cannot defend myself. Be merciful—forgive me!"

All her anger had died away as suddenly as it arose; she let her hands remain in his; her whole bearing had become gentle and spiritless.

"Indeed, I forgive you," she said, softly. "You were not to blame."

"Mary, take me again. Darling, let the old times come back—the blissful times, do you remember? Dearest, I love you so. With all my soul I believe that you love me. Take me. Let us be married at once. We will be always together—we will not part—and no doubt, nor lie, nor slander shall come between us—"

He slipped the long slim hands she had so admired from her hands

to her arms, and very gently he tried to draw her to him. For the space of a second or two she suffered herself to lean towards him, and was almost on his breast; then with a strong effort of will she drew back from him, and opened the eyes which had closed beneath his upon his face.

"Do not ask me any more," she said. "Don't, Claude. I am not angry or wounded at all. I have forgiven and forgotten; I am not angry—but that is the end. It is the end! Everything is over and done with, and wiped out of our minds and our hearts—"

"Why?"

"Because I also—have to make amends. "There is a man," she said, striving, not very successfully, to keep a steady voice—"a man whom I treated shamefully—you remember?—you—"

He took his hands from her arms, and a great coldness settled upon his face as he drew back from her.

"He loved me—all my life," Mary went on, with a desperate effort after composure. The thing had seemed easy enough to do until she tried it. In her own mind, so full of bitterness and wounded pride, she had rehearsed with satisfaction the scene that was turning out in reality to be such a failure, when she should tell the lover who had cast her off that she had turned to other arms than his. She had thoroughly resolved on the course she meant to pursue; she had all but pledged her word to Spilling—nothing would turn her! Yet it was with a very sick heart that she set about justifying her course. "I treated him disgracefully—for your sake. I cringed to you, and asked your forgiveness; it was his I should have asked. He made no complaint; he loved me all the same. If that tale—if one a hundred times uglier could be true of me, and he knew it, he would love me still. He is faithful—absolutely. He is penniless—he is unhappy—he has not a friend in the world—and I—I—"

She stopped, trembling, breathing hard; she could not say the words. Piteously, with fear and entreaty in her dark eyes, she looked at Claude.

He stood, drawn to his full height, his handsome features pale and stiffened.

"You are going to marry Mr. Burton?" he said.

Her eyes fell from him; she bent her head. "Yes, that is what I am going to do—if he will have me," she answered, almost whispering the words.

For a long minute he continued to look down upon her in impassive silence as she stood with bent head before him. Said Mona to

herself, grown impatient in her suspense, "They must have slipped through the window and gone away; as if anybody was likely to demean themselves by listening!" She was about angrily to throw open the door when Claude's voice, cold, formal, and polite, fell on her ear, chilling the expectant Mona to the heart, and dashing to the ground all the high hopes she had been cherishing while she stood sentinel holding the handle of the drawing-room door.

With a long breath, as if awaking from a dream, Claude broke the heavy silence.

"The case being so, I need not trouble you with my presence any longer?" he said.

He put the statement in the form of a question; but no answer coming, Mary only looking at him with parted lips and startled, eager gaze, he moved away. He picked up his hat, looked intently into it for a minute, then turned to her quickly as if about to speak. But looking in her face, the words—how could the commonplace words of farewell be spoken between them?—died on his lips. With his own face cold and set, he gazed into hers pale and quivering with pain; and when he could endure the sight no longer, he turned, and with teeth hard clinched and head held erectly, walked from the room.

It was too late for Claude Garnett to get away from Gaythorpe that night, as he was impatient to do. The sound of his brother's voice—the voice that had poured that lie into his ears—was hateful to him. The neighborhood of the foolish little wife, whose history he now knew, and for whose feeble sake himself and the woman he loved had been ruthlessly sacrificed, was an offence to him. The wretched baby about whom she drivelled, and for whose sake Claude supposed Cecil had consented to keep beneath his roof the woman who had disgraced him, was an aggravation, an irritation, and a bore.

Yet was Cecil so crestfallen and humbled before him that his manhood would not allow him to crush the poor wretch with the scorn he felt; while Lally was so evidently afraid of him that he found it incumbent on him to be more than ordinarily gentle with her. The baby, however, he felt justified in ignoring, and in so doing unconsciously avenged himself on both father and mother.

He could not start until after breakfast on the morning following his interview with Mary, and this meal the brothers took tête-à-tête.

Cecil was nervous and ill at ease. He did not know how matters had sped with his brother at the Hall the night before, and he did not dare to ask. It was plain from the expression of Claude's face

and the tone of his voice that he was in an unapproachable mood. Cecil glanced furtively at the compressed line of the handsome lip, the haughty droop of the eyelid, and, remembering Mary's words to himself, feared to augur anything very hopeful.

He took up a letter which lay beside his plate, and his brow contracted as he read the signature, "Charlotte Barkaway." The name was not one that smelled very sweetly in the Rector's nostrils just then.

The letter proved to be short and congratulatory in tone. Cecil uttered an involuntary exclamation as he read it; he looked across at his brother.

"This is extraordinary news! I had no idea—" he said. He hesitated a minute, meeting his brother's questioning glance. "I told you of—Mr. Spilling's—death?" he said, bringing out the name with a painful flush. "He has left money—a considerable sum of money—a fortune, Mrs. Barkaway calls it—to Mary Burne."

"Indeed!"

Cecil turned to reread his letter, "Extraordinary!" he repeated; "I suppose it is true. Mrs. Barkaway heard it from the doctor, she says, and he had it from Spilling himself. Is it true, do you think? Can it be true? Mary—Mary with a fortune! Extraordinary!"

Claude helped himself to a bit of toast; his hand trembled in spite of himself.

"I don't see that Mr. Spilling could have done better with his money," he said. "He could not have left it to a nobler woman."

Cecil's anxiety overcame his fear of his brother. "Claude, did you know anything of this? Has Mary told you?" he asked, and asked trembling.

"I knew nothing of it," Claude answered, steadily, "and I am thankful I did not know. Because yesterday I went to her and asked her over again to be my wife."

"And is all right between you again?"

Claude looked his brother full in the face. "That depends upon what your idea of 'all right' may be," he said, stiffly. "I apologized to Miss Burne for what must have appeared to her vile conduct. She accepted my apology, but declined every other proposal I made."

Cecil sat with his eyes dropped to the table-cloth, wretched and ashamed. "I can only repeat," he said, in hollow and dejected tones, "what I have said before, and shall keep on saying, inwardly, *while I live*, that for my share in what has come to pass I am

heartily sorry. Heartily. If any sacrifice of mine could atone I—I—"

He broke off there—his brother's manner was so discouraging, and his own words, even to himself, sounded vain and hollow—broke off, and dejectedly helped the eggs and bacon and poured out the coffee.

As for Claude, he was grateful when he could decently escape. Cecil's remorse was natural, perhaps, and perhaps did him credit, but it made his companionship insupportable to his brother. He put on his hat and strolled about the prim little Rectory garden; then, hardly knowing where he went, he wandered down the village street; and soon was passing through those lanes and fields and meadows which his walks with Mary had made familiar to him.

So Mary was going to be rich. Claude Garnett was not a money-loving man, nor one with expensive tastes, and he had showed that he would not make a mercenary marriage; yet, if money could have come to him in Mary's hand, many difficulties which had bothered him of late would so sweetly have ceased to exist. She would not have been one whit more welcome herself, but the fortune she brought would have been very welcome too.

Yet, on this part of his loss, his mind did not dwell as he walked mechanically through the tree-shadowed lanes and the corn-fields white for harvest—the pleasant familiar paths in which he should walk with Mary never again, but where she would walk—with Mr. Bob Burton!

He set his teeth hard, and dug his nails into the palms of his hands as he thought of it. The slouching, red-faced young man with the country-cut clothes, the slow brain, the drawling tongue, and—Mary! Mary who was a very queen of beauty. His heart ached with rage and jealousy and pain and grief as the gracious figure rose before him; the splendidly-carried head, the heavy masses of hair springing with many a delicate wave and tiny ringlet from the broad white brow and the grand white throat; the rounded cheek, and beautiful bust and firm, not too slender, waist and long limbs; the hands and feet, which Lally looked at in dismay, so many sizes larger were they than her own little delicate members, but which were shaped as should be shaped, the hands and feet of a queen!

She was beautiful—beautiful! Claude said to himself—beautiful enough to satisfy the world—beautiful enough in the first instance to have attracted him in spite of himself. Yet it was not her beauty any more than her money which was so dear to him. It was Mary

—Mary—Mary herself! Mary with her light, brave spirit, her quick tongue and happy laughter and tender womanliness. It was this—this that he had loved—this and her love of him!

It was of this he thought as he walked along; and then a sudden turn of the lane down which he had wandered brought him face to face with Mary Burne. For a moment his heart beat loudly, thumping against his side, and the blood hammered confusedly in his temples, and the recollection flashed across his mind of that time when they had parted before, when he had turned his back on her and cast her off, and she had sought him out and had humbly begged for his favor.

Only for a moment—and then he remembered. Remembered the money which must forever prevent his asking again what he had asked last night, remembered Bob Burton, remembered the last night's parting: realized that all which was before him was a repetition of that pain.

They were two pale faces which confronted each other between the high and straggling hedge-rows of the lane. For a length of time not a word was said. An age, as it seemed to both—not longer in reality than it took for the old rook, who had been keeping watch in the tree beneath which they stopped, to fly heavily over their heads on his way to inform his innumerable cronies in the neighboring fresh-ploughed field that enemies were near. The glossy black wings flapped across the blue of the sky, and dropped behind the oak-trees and the hedge of brier and thorn, and Claude Garnett forced himself to speak. She had come upon him so suddenly, however, and he had passed a miserable and wakeful night, and was feeling unhinged and broken. He had not the full mastery over his voice, which trembled and had lost its tone. Mary, looking at him in that searching light, saw with a sharp pang that he had aged considerably in the months since they parted, that he looked worn and gray and wearied. He looked at her with eyes that told his heart-ache.

"I did not expect—I hardly hoped that we should meet again," he said. "As it is, I suppose we meet to part?"

"You are going away?" Mary's breath came sobbingly, as if she had been running hard. She thought that he must hear the tumultuous beating of her heart. Was it pain, was it joy to stand with him thus for yet another minute out of the long life before her in which he would not be? Whatever its cause, her emotion for the *minute* was overmastering and almost forbade speech.

"In an hour's time," he said. "I do not think that I shall trouble Gaythorpe with my presence again." Then he waited. The crow had communicated his intelligence; with an enormous cawing the whole black flock arose from the field, betook themselves slowly over the heads of the pair, calling down angry words and threats at the disturbers of their peace as they passed away.

"And you?" Claude said, with an effort. "I suppose your future is not likely to bring you across my path again?"

"I think not," she panted, and had to stop for breath; her lips were trembling; she was fighting desperately to keep back her tears. It is probable that I shall go out—to"—she tried to say Bob Burton's name, but failed—"that we shall settle in—where he is."

He was silent, and his aching eyes looked beyond her—away between the banks of brake and trailing blackberry branches and twining yellow honeysuckle, over the shadows cast by the tall hedges and way-side trees upon the grass-grown path; away over the landscape of ripe ruddy wheat and waving white barley and narrow winding river and rising background of yellow gorse—seeing nothing of them, only a black outlook of pain and loss and ceaseless regret.

After a minute his gaze returned to her face.

"I left you with small ceremony last night," he said; "since we part for so long, perhaps, it is not amiss that we have the chance again to say good-bye."

He took both her hands in both of his, and stooped his head until his face touched hers. "For the last time—may I!" he whispered, and so laid a long kiss on her trembling lips.

When he lifted his head his eyes were full of tears. "Love of my life—good-bye," he said, held her hands still in a minute's close pressure, then gently dropped them and turned away.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BOB'S LUCK TURNS AT LAST

THAT fate which had so long denied to Bob Burton the boon he craved—work for his strong hands to do—relented at length. Before he sailed for Australia he obtained the address of a man who, years before, had been a small farmer and miller at Gaythorpe. Bob had played about the mill in his young days with the miller's sons, had stood on the cranky little gallery to see the sails go round, and had dusted his jacket with flour in his gambols about the crazy floors. In the days of his prosperity old Burton had more than once stood the friend of his impecunious neighbor with his half-dozen children.

To this man, then, Bob, as his destiny would have it, made his way on landing, and with him found a home and a welcome and fair wages, and best of all—hard work. Work which left him too tired for homesickness, for lovesickness, for the sickness of useless longing and restless pain. So that Bob, his flannel shirt rolled to his elbows, his skin burned to a fine red brown, every superfluous ounce of flesh having vanished from his square, sturdy frame, passing his life in chopping and sawing trees, was a happier man by far than he who had lounged about the handsome rooms at The Cedars eating out his heart in idleness.

About thirty miles of fencing was in process of erection, and besides Bob Burton there worked at this task from sunrise to sunset a half-dozen "hands;" of whom two were English university men, and one was the son of a baronet.

Deveril, the fourth son of Sir Kenneth Dare, of Oakleigh Park, the terror and grief of his family at home; who had been sent down from Cambridge; who had found the Church, the army, and the bar each in turn such a terrible fag that he had in the earliest stage of his acquaintance with it cut each one of those professions; who was as reckless, as wild, as lawless, as any of the station hands by whom he worked, was also musical in every fibre of his being. Musical also, in a lesser degree, was Patty Sagfield, the ex-miller's elderly maiden daughter. The hours after work was over were made festive *by song, by piano, by fiddle, by banjo.*

All instruments came alike to Deveril Dare, he could extract music from any that had ever been invented, from the grand organ in the music-room at Oakleigh Park to his own white and beautiful teeth, upon which, by the aid of strong taper finger-nails he could rap out "Home, Sweet Home" with variations in a very ingenious fashion. He could sing, too, in a beautiful tenor voice of love and death and parting, of the pains of earth and the joys of heaven, till the tears stood thick in his hearers' eyes; or he could black his handsome face, brush up his curling dark hair to a point above his sooty brow, and produce shouts of laughter over the irresistible fashion in which he extended his mouth and sang "yah-yah!" to the banjo.

And the daughters of the farmers at the "neighboring" stations thought nothing of riding twenty and thirty miles to knock up a dance at Sagfield's, where the "handsome little chap with the wicked eyes" played such heavenly polkas. Dare would swing half round on his music-stool as he played, keeping time and directing the awkward performers with his head, encouraging them to fresh exertions as much by this inspiring action and the expression of his face as by the bars of his music.

They were clumsy-dancers, most of the men, and Bob had been taught the terpsichorean art at the Midborough Academy for years in his early youth, as his employers knew well. But Bob alone would not dance. He would not dance, and he could not sing, and would only listen with a stolid face to the music which had not charms to soothe his savage breast.

All the sorrow of his life was too recent for him to desire to recall it by the aid of waltz music set to trashy words.

"What rot it all is!" Bob the unimpressible said to himself; "as if a fellow who felt like that could *sing*!"

He did not forget the lost voices; he thought of the dear, dead faces, and the faces which were only dead to him, with a pain too real and a sorrow too heavy to allow him the relief of sentimentalizing. So Bob sat and thought his own thoughts, and shut out the music—heathen that he was—as much as was possible to him, or went to sleep. Whereupon the daughter of the house, who was as lively as in her first youth, and the young ladies who had their score miles of moonlight ride before them, would black or red his nose, and put large chalk-marks on his dark red-brown cheeks. So that Bob, awaking, would wonder a little stupidly at their merriment, and would go to his bed and rise to his work in the morning never a bit the wiser. He was not vain or self-conscious enough to connect their

merriment with his own person, and in the shed which, furnished with a rug or two, served him as bedroom, there was no looking-glass.

Little Devil-Dare, as the musical genius did not object to be called, who had commenced by taking many "rises" out of the serious preoccupied young man, and had been often very funny at Bob's expense, soon tired of the amusement. Bob was manifestly indifferent to mockery or cursing, and the "Devil" tried him with both. His wrath was, in those days, almost as difficult to arouse as his laughter, his mind being entirely given over to matters with which no inmate of that rough-and-ready household had anything to do.

In time a kind of respect grew up in the mind of the baronet's ne'er-do-well son for the silent young man, with the strong hands and the square shoulders, who worked untired at his side. He ceased to be witty at Bob's expense, and hung on at Sagfield's, roughing it longer than he would have done, because of the liking he had taken to his chum—a liking which Bob quite unconsciously reciprocated.

And so the months went on; and Bob, who, in waking and sleeping hours, often and often heard Mary's voice saying to him, "Come back, be sure to come back," was only a few pounds nearer that fortune which would enable him to return, and had not seen her face for more than a year.

At the end of that time there fell a day on which the sum of money the long-suffering baronet among the Surrey hills paid quarterly to his agent in New South Wales for the benefit of the unsatisfactory son became due; and Dare, who had to walk to the nearest township to receive his "screw," persuaded Bob Burton to accompany him.

The money having been obtained, and its insufficiency sworn over by the graceless recipient, the two men went on to the post-office to inquire for letters.

For Dare, as it happened, there were none; but for Bob, who had asked mechanically, expecting nothing—for who was there to write to Bob?—there was a letter.

He stared stupidly at it as he came away; and Dare, who noticed everything, saw that his companion's deep complexion had paled to the lips, and that the hands which held the letter trembled. Then the "Devil," who, if he was a blackguard, was at least a gentlemanly one, turned away his face and for a long time held his peace.

But even after reasonable time had been given him in which to recover his self-command, Bob remained a more than ordinarily slow companion. He did not respond to the remarks addressed to him;

he took no notice of the women in whom, old or young, pretty or ugly, Dare showed such an unconcealed interest; and who, for their part, cast glances of equal favor upon the stalwart young fellow whose blue, still boyish-looking eyes shone out of his sunburned face with such noticeable effect, and upon the handsome little fellow with his impertinent glances and his air of devil-may-careism who swung along at Bob's side.

Dare's pockets were full of money. Not a stroke more work would be got out of him till they were emptied. The same process which had served him on other occasions to do this effectually in the briefest time was to be pursued. When the two men stopped at the door of that place of entertainment which Dare favored, and where Bob had accompanied him before, the latter drew back, and seemed to awake from a dream.

"I won't go in," he said. "I—there is my letter. I've got no money to play with, and I don't want anything to drink. I'll stop out and read my letter."

Dare acquiesced. He had brought Bob along to have a "good-time," and he experienced a passing disgust at this slighting of his friendly intentions. He could not understand the state of mind of a man who was not always ready for something to drink, who could resist the charm of the gaming-table, who would not rather have had half an hour's chaff with the handsome, free-tongued young woman at the bar than any letter that could have been penned in earth, heaven, or hell. But then Burton and he had been brought up in different schools, and it was not Dare's custom to lose much time in speculating on the motives or the tastes of other people.

As the night drew on Bob sought his chum at the attractive but not too respectable resort which the latter affected. There were ten miles of lonely country between the township and the Sagfield's residence, and Dare suggested that they should stay where they were; but Bob objected. The night was warm and still and full of stars; Bob seemed to himself to tread on air as he walked along; he had a feeling of too great happiness—a feeling not experienced since childhood, almost painful in its intensity, not to be borne in the stuffiness and the straitness of a hired bed. It did not seem to him that sleep would ever visit him again; he did not wish for it. Sleep, during which he would be unconscious of the blessedness which had come to him, would be a wanton waste of precious time, a cruel slighting of transcendent bliss.

The Dare-devil was out of temper, and a little depressed.

"I've had my own luck," he said, as they walked along, "and that's the devil's. I went into that cursed hole with five-and-twenty quid, and look here—that's every dashed coin that remains with me."

He stuck his hand into his trousers pocket and brought out, displaying them on his open palm, a few miserable silver bits and coppers. He surveyed the sad remnant of his fortune with melancholy disgust.

"Look at them," he said, and held them within an inch of Bob's nose, tossed them in the air, caught them clinking in his hand, then, with a sudden jerk, flung them away into the blackness of the wood they were skirting.

"What the thunder are you at?" Bob asked, roused from his waking dream. He looked with dismay into the wall of dark trees into which the shillings and sixpences had been flung, until Dare, laughing, caught him by the arm and drew him along again.

"That's the last of the bloomin' screw," he said. "It's a pity I didn't chuck the lot of it there to begin with. I'd fling the old governor after it without any hesitation if I had the old boy here, and I wish I had. What's the good of fathers, Bob, if they won't stump up to a better tune than that?"

"Twenty-five pounds is enough to throw away in one evening," Bob reminded him, slowly. "That kind of carrying on isn't encouraging to a father, Dare."

"Stingy old beggar! I'd like to encourage him!" Dare said. "I lost the whole infernal lot, and half as much winnings at the back of it, in the last hour," he went on. "There was a shindy—I had a fellow kicked out of the place—I had caught him cheating; and after that the luck turned against me—dead against me, she was, Bob—the dashed old hag! She's old, I know, because there never was anything young of the female gender, so d—— ill-natured? And—what's been your game, old chap?"

"I was all right," Bob said, in a voice that was positively awed by its happiness. "Quite all right; right as a trivet. I don't know what I did. I walked about—in the gardens, you know—and sat down—on a chair."

Dare looked at his companion as well as he could make him out in the starlight, and burst into a shout of laughter.

"By the Lord, you're a fellow to break loose and get away up to *the delights* of town, and to shake a free leg once in a way," he

shouted. "To run riot in garden walks, and to indulge in the mad dissipation of sitting in a chair."

Dare laughed at his chum, but he did not by any means despise the man he laughed at. He knew that he was not a milk-sop, nor a coward, nor a man that, having a little money in his pocket, hesitated to lend it or to spend it, or to give it away as the exactions of friendship might require. And although Dare was reckless himself, he put that down to the peculiarities of his own temperament and upbringing, and was sane enough to comprehend that it would not be convenient to have all of his pattern. So he laughed, but quite good-naturedly; and Bob did not take the laughter amiss.

"I've had good news, Dare," he said, with that note of awe in his voice, as he walked along. The night was so very quiet. It seemed to Bob as if he himself were included in the hush and the stillness of nature. "I wish you had had better luck, Dare, and then we should both of us have been in the best of form to-night."

Dare shrugged his shoulders and thrust his hands into his empty pockets. "Oh, as for me!" he said, "sooner or later 'twould have been bound to go like that—or worse. As well first as last. You had a letter from home?"

"Yes." Bob felt in the breast-pocket of the flannel shirt he wore and brought out the precious missive. He could not have read it in that light, but there was pleasure in fingering it, in getting ever so dim a sight of the envelope which held the letter that had transformed the world for him within a half-dozen hours. So he peered at the black, bold lines of the address, and put the little packet back in his pocket, and for a few minutes kept his hand there, touching the sacred paper upon which that other hand had lain.

He was, as has been seen, of a reserved and taciturn nature, and never had known how to communicate those misfortunes which had befallen him, however deeply he had felt them. Yet in his joy his heart was so full that a great and hitherto unexperienced desire fell upon him to speak.

"This," he said, still secretly pressing the letter with his strong, work-hardened fingers against his heart—"this is from the place where I was born, Dare—from the woman I love."

Dare's manner changed instantly from its usual reckless boisterousness to respectful gravity. "I thought as much, of course," he said. "I guessed that far when the fellow at the post-office handed it across."

"She—is miles above me," Bob went on, lifting his face and gaz-

ing up at the immeasurable height of the stars. "When she was a little thing and I was quite a boy, I wanted to marry her first. I remember I used to cry about her at night at school. There never was a time when I cared so much as to look at another woman. You wouldn't either, Dare, if you'd seen her. She—"

He was going to say how beautiful she was, but broke off through a sort of delicacy.

"She's waiting till you get rich enough to go back to marry her," Dare suggested, thinking to himself it was a poor outlook for the young woman at home. "You've kept very dark, Bob—but I don't blame you. It's that makes you such a sober chap, eh?"

"I thought I hadn't a chance," Bob said, softly, "and I didn't care for anything else. I've never said that sort of thing till to-night, Dare—but 'tis a fact. There didn't seem any sense in things. And to-day she's written that she'll marry me. She'll come out to me, or I may go to her. She's rich—I wish 'twas me that was rich and could give it to her! She's rich, and she's written—"

He never got any further. From that dark wood, by the side of which they walked, there came the sound of a rifle-shot; a bullet whizzed through the still night air at about the distance of half an inch from the back of both men's heads.

With an oath Dare sprang round. The figure of a man stood within a dozen yards of him in the shadow of the gum-trees. It was too dark for Dare by ordinary sense to recognize him there, yet, in a flash of inward light, it was revealed to him that the man whom, with every indignity and degradation, he had kicked from the gambling-bell that night was awaiting him.

Having fired his rifle, this man flung it from him, and stood up facing them, his back to a tree.

Dare's hand sought the revolver he always carried, but Burton, quicker than he, had rushed in upon their assailant, who stood with his left arm flung across his own breast, his right hanging at his side; till in an instant it was swung aloft, and descended with a tremendous thud upon Bob's chest.

There was a curse, a cry that echoed through the vast and silent wood, a choking sob, and Bob Burton, reeling backward, crashed over and fell in his blood at his murderer's feet.

An instant—then the sharp crack of the revolver lifted in the slight fingers so clever on ivory key and lute string, the heavy fall of another body, and Devil-Dare's would-be assassin had passed to *his account*.

CHAPTER XXIX

CONCLUSION

A FEW months later on Mr. Deveril Dare, sobered for the time being by the incidents of that fatal night, and once more provided with the means for turning over a new leaf in his native country, made his way to the village where Bob's home had been, and where lived the girl who had caused him such long pain and given him such brief happiness—and saw Mary Burne.

The little fellow was immensely surprised when she appeared, and he went away deeply impressed with the charm of the tall, handsome girl in her black dress, who had received him with such kindness.

"Poor Bob!" he said to himself, as Bob's square, sturdy figure, with work-stained hands and sun-scorched face and slouching walk and drawling speech rose before him. "He was a good fellow, the doggedest, faithfulest, best fellow in the world!"

For Bob, as it seemed to him, had been killed in his place, at any rate in his cause, and the men had had a friendship for each other, and Dare would not allow himself to harbor for an instant a treasonable thought of his lost chum—only this was not the kind of girl he had pictured as likely to be in love with Bob.

Their interview was not a very long one. The subject on which he had come to speak was too painful to bear the dwelling on. Mary walked with him across that corner of the park which led, through the stack-yard and the orchard, to the house where Bob was born, had lived and worked, hoped and despaired. The house, whose square, unlovely rooms, peopled with the homely familiar forms, had been with him in his dreams; which, with its large, fragrant garden and wide unproductive fields, had seemed to him the fairest, as it was the dearest, spot in the world.

Dare looked in respectful silence upon the place. Easy enough to place the figure of his dead friend in such a scene as this! The difficulty—to picture him at the side of Mary Burne!

Before he left he told her that the word that had been last on his poor friend's lips, sobbed aloud to the pitiless night, the heed-

less stars, the silent forest, had been her name. And he gave into her hands, lying in a little case of silver Dare had fashioned for it, the letter which had made the last hours of Bob's life his happiest on earth. But the words which Mary had delayed so long to write, and had written at last in a fervor of pity and of self-reproach—not, alas! of love and tenderness—were illegible now, and through the folds of the letter the knife had cut which had found a resting-place in Bob's heart.

Claude Garnett found it necessary, after all, to sell a thousand acres of his ancestral estate, and to let the house in which his forefathers had lived and died. His mother and sisters made a home for themselves in Devonshire, and he found himself, for a time, a wanderer on the face of the earth—a life for which he was by no means suited, and which speedily became utterly distasteful to him. He finally settled down in some rooms in London, leading an aimless, useless, and sufficiently miserable life between his club in St. James's and his lodging in Piccadilly. He knew a good many people, and got to know a great many more. His name was so respectable, his manners so gentle, his appearance so good, that the doors of a great many very pleasant houses were open to him, and he might have taken every dinner of his life at other men's tables. Several women of match-making tendencies planned advantageous marriages for him; and once or twice he must have known that, by the speaking of a word, he might have won for himself the wherewithal to turn out that loathed tenant at Bygrave Court, to buy back the grudging ancestral acres, to establish himself once more in the position he desired. He might have won the fortune wherewith to enjoy the life he coveted, and the wife to enjoy it with him.

He must have known it, but the word was never spoken. Never spirited or ardent in bearing, his demeanor became each day more listless and indolent. Yet, in certain quarters, his indifference did not militate against his success. Making not the smallest effort to that end, with no slightest pleasure in the position when it was attained, he became an object of deep interest and of unceasing speculation to several women, both married and single, in that circle in which he moved. He shut his eyes to the fact as much as was possible, and when he could not ignore was simply bored to death, yet could not bring himself to make the effort to escape from the flattering position.

In course of time there came to him a letter from the Rector of

Gaythorpe, telling him of the death of Robert Burton. In the few letters which had passed between the brothers the name of Mary Burne had not been mentioned. It appeared in this letter in one short sentence:

"The news came by telegram: it is a terrible blow to Mary."

Many a time during that day Claude found himself repeating that phrase, "a terrible blow to Mary." Was it possible it could be that? She would be startled, shocked, full of pity and grief—but a blow to her heart—was that possible?

It was a long time ago now—those summer months during which Mary had loved him, but he had not forgotten—he had not made even an effort to forget; there were things that he remembered, words and looks and tones of hers, as vividly—far more vividly than the events of yesterday. What had Bob Burton, what had all the rest of the world been to her then? And now—"a terrible blow to Mary!"

All the old horrid pain of their parting came back to him in its sickening intensity. He was tortured with jealousy of the poor fellow who was dead, bothered with curiosity as to the extent of that blow which Mary had received, suddenly madly athirst for news of her. Yet, in acknowledging his brother's letter, he was careful not to mention her name.

He did not hear from Gaythorpe again for several months, and then Cecil wrote to say that the country was looking charming now, the trees in their first fresh green, the air delicious with freshness and fragrance. The little son was growing daily in strength and beauty, and was, his impartial father declared, of a winning sweetness unusual in one of his tender years. It grieved the father of this prodigy to think that his dear brother Claude and his dear little son were up to this strangers. Would Claude come down and get a whiff of fresh air and make his nephew's acquaintance?

To which Claude had replied that he could not come to his brother's house as a visitor if he thought his presence there objectionable to any of his brother's wife's people. If Miss Burne would send him the faintest intimation only that the sight of him would not be unwelcome to her, he would at once accept Cecil's invitation. Wanting this, he thought it better, for his own sake as well as others, to defer indefinitely the pleasure of making the little Edric's acquaintance.

With this letter in his hand the Rector sought his sister-in-law. The humility, which had for a time set upon him so strangely, had

dropped as an ill-fitting garment from his shoulders long ago. For the comfort of his own hearth, this was as well perhaps. To have maintained a humble attitude with Lally would have been both difficult and dangerous. With his parishioners he had quickly resumed his self-assertiveness and his pragmatistical airs. "Th' parson, he's as cocksure as ever," they said to each other, winking slowly as Cecil, with the consciousness of having settled whatever was the matter in hand satisfactorily and forever, strolled away.

But with Mary the old Cecil had never quite come back. In her presence, and remembering a mistake he had once made, he was never quite so certain of all things in heaven and earth. For want of that assurance Mary found him certainly the pleasanter. Yet was there never much sympathy between them, and, conscious of the wrong he had done her, the Rector was a little uneasy always in his sister-in-law's society.

"You see what he says, Mary," he said now, as she handed the letter back to him. "Is he to come or not?"

"I do not feel called on to decide the matter," Mary said, with much indifference of manner. "He can please himself, I suppose?"

"He wants to please you, I think," the Rector said, humbly. "Could you not intrust me with one word to bid him come?"

"I? What do you think I am made of?" She flashed an angry look upon him, the color had flooded her cheek as of old. "Let him come or stay away, as he likes. It is a matter of indifference to me. If you want to tell him anything, tell him that."

The fresh leaves of the spring have darkened through the heat and the dust of summer, have ripened to the red and the brown and gold of autumn, are soaking into the ground with the winter's rains before the question of Claude's coming arises again.

Mary has been staying away from home for a few days—it is astonishing how the desire for Mary's presence has deepened in the bosoms of her dear friends since she is a woman of independent means, not merely one of a large and poverty-stricken family—and on her return she is informed of what small news there is to tell by Mona, who has accompanied her to her bedroom.

Mona is a person of much importance now—lately engaged to be married. Something had apparently opened the eyes of Algernon Hopson, her old friend, at last to behold and understand the beauty to which Mona had believed him indifferent, with the above satisfactory result. It wasn't such a good marriage as Mona might have

made if she had gone to stay with Mary, as she ought to have done, at Bygrave Court; but it was the best, under the circumstances, possible to her, and Mona always thought it was brought about by a particularly pretty dress which Mary had bought her; so she no longer bore her sister any grudge.

Mona having communicated the affairs immediately concerning herself and lover, the affairs of his family and her own, Mary proceeded to ask a question about the little Edric at the Rectory, for whom she had developed a, to Mona's thinking, perfectly ridiculous affection.

Edric was well and kicking, Mona said; she had not been to the Rectory for several days. Lally had done nothing but cry with neuralgia on the occasion of her last visit, and Cecil had fussed and ordered every one about like the little prig he was; why Lally didn't throw cushions at him Mona couldn't think. And oh, a letter had come from Cecil's horrid old mother down in Devonshire, and Claude had inflammation of the lungs, and was very ill—dangerously ill.

Mary, taking the pins out of her hat before her glass, watched her own face whiten through her veil. Mona, sitting on the edge of the bed, also watched that process with eyes of understanding.

"Dying!" Mona went on, ever given over to the mischievous occupation known as piling up the agony.

Mary, with a gasp, turned round from the glass.

"Well, they did say that there had been a day or two when they thought he was dying," Mona declared, thrusting her hands into Mary's muff, which had been flung upon the bed, and burying her chin in the fur. "But I dare say it wasn't true—people make such a fuss. Old Mrs. Garnett wanted Cecil to ask him to the Rectory, because where he is the air is so relaxing. So if he's well enough to travel right across England there can't be much the matter with him. But Cecil says its no use his asking him; he asked him before, he says, and he wouldn't come. He talked of going into Devonshire to see Claude. But Lally cried, because she said she was so frightened at nights when Cecil's away, so I don't know how they settled it—or care much! They make me so cross, those two."

Mary said nothing, but, after a minute's reflection, slowly picked up again her discarded outer garment, and began thrusting in her arms.

"You're undressing, you know," Mona reminded her with the superior air which must be expected in a young lady of seventeen

who was going to be married before her eldest sister ; " make haste, Mary, and come down and have some tea and get some warmth into your bones. What *are* you doing ? "

But Mary went on slowly resuming her out-door garments. " I think I will just run down and see Lally if she isn't well," she said — " and Edric. "

So the eldest girl slips away from Mona, still bursting with interesting details she is longing to impart, and eludes the watchfulness of Tina and Iona waiting in the hall for her descent, their small hearts full of joyous expectation as to the presents which Mary never fails to bring them home ; leaves Mrs. Burne sighing over the tea she has had up a couple of hours earlier than usual because some one had said Mary would be cold from her journey, and to the disgust of the entire family escapes.

She does not go at once to the Rectory, nor does she greatly hurry her steps, although the air is damp and cold, and she had been thoroughly chilled with her homeward ride. Slowly she walks along, and with brows knit and an anxious, drooping mouth looks up, sad-eyed, at the wintry sky. She reaches and enters the church, having called in at a cottage for the key on her way, and sits alone there for half an hour in the ice-cold atmosphere of the mournful place, looking up at a tablet she had long ago caused to be erected over the pew where Bob as a child, and boy, and very young man—awkward and stiff and blushing in his Sunday clothes, his tight gloves, and the overwhelming consciousness of the mustache which was beginning to appear on his upper lip—had sat at his mother's side.

Oh, poor Bob ! Tragedy and you seemed ever so far apart. So easy to picture you here, to place you among the blue-green turnips, the yellow corn of your fields, the raspberry canes and hollyhocks of the Ashfields garden ; so impossible to imagine you lying murdered in your distant grave !

Sitting there in the gray, cold light of the church, with her eyes upon the homely name and simple inscription on the marble tablet, Mary is able at length to adjust her ideas. She rises then—her face is pale with the cold and tremulous with emotion—walks into the Burton pew ; by standing on a hassock is enabled to lay her hand upon the cold marble.

" Good-bye, dear Bob," she says, " faithfullest lover, truest heart ! I am going, but I shall not forget you, Bob. Whatever happens I will never forget. "

The gray shadows are gathering in the great, ghostly church.

Mary's fingers are cold in contact with the stone as if grasped in a dead man's hand. Hurriedly she leaves the church, and shudders till she has turned the key in the lock and is running over the short distance of meadow and road that divide the church from the Rectory.

By the time she reaches the house the pallor and the sadness have died out of her face; it is blooming and beautiful again with the glow of health and hope and conquered irresolution, joyful with the peace of settled purpose.

Having made up her mind, Mary does not let the grass grow under her feet. Entering the Garnetts' house, she does not ask for Lally or turn aside to seek the small nephew upon whom she dotes, but makes straight for the library. Through the window as she passed she had seen Cecil sitting there in the glow of an unusually large fire.

He thinks it is Lally who enters and does not look up. It is a new thing for the Rector to indulge in a rest at this time of day, to lie so absolutely still at any hour. Cecil has a way of fussing even in idleness. Now, with his back turned to the new-comer, he shades his face with his hand and looks into the fire.

Mary will get her errand over with no beating about the bush; having once delivered herself of what she has to say, she will not stop to discuss the matter. She will dispense with her dear brother-in-law's comments—she has left the door open behind her that she may the more readily escape.

"Cecil," she says, and lays a hand on the back of his chair, "it is I—Mary. I have run down to say that I think you may as well write and ask Claude to come. If you like, and you think it is necessary, you can say I wish him to come. Do you hear? Write at once and—"

The Rector, shivering a little as if from weakness or emotion, rises to his feet and faces round upon her; and behold it is not the Rector at all, but Claude Garnett, who has been sitting listless, dejected, weak from recent illness, in the Rector's chair; who stretches eager hands that tremble towards her; who, in a voice unsteady with surprise and joy, calls upon Mary's name.

THE END

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